The World of Musical Theatre from the West End to Broadway and beyond

MUSICALS

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Rachel Tucker

Why the West End star is rocking out on her new album

Plus!

What it's really like to grow up on the stage

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Including
Next to Normal, Miss Saigon and Sesame Street

Recording reviews
Including
Idina Menzel's solo album, Guys & Dolls, and our pick from the archive: Follies

As tours begin for Aladdin, Pretty Woman and more, we explore life on the road

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Elaine Paige on why Mamma Mia! is such a super trouper

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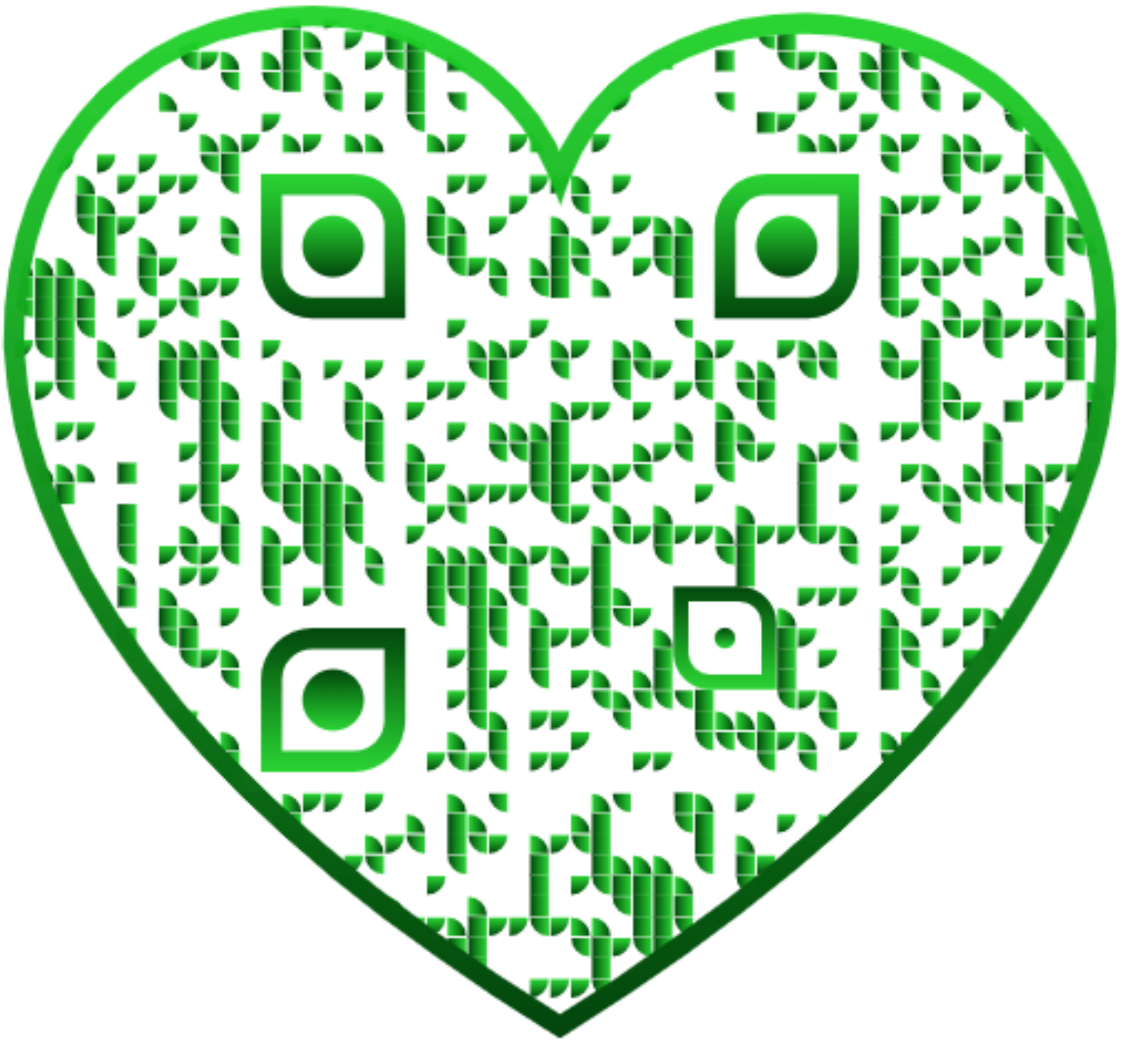

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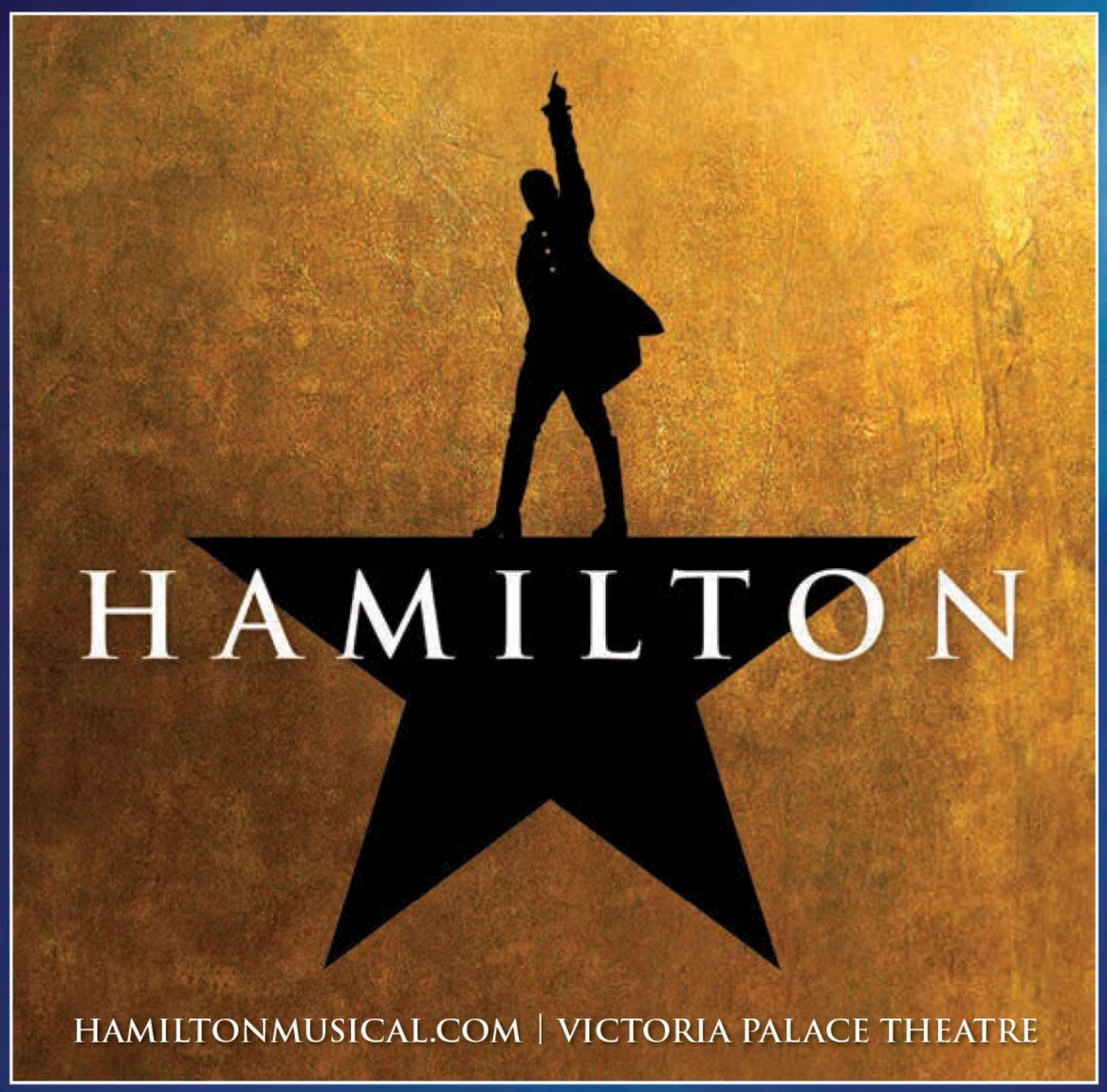

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It's a big challenge to tour a show, but rewarding too

This summer, I was lucky enough to spend a week at the Minack Theatre in Porthcurno, Cornwall, where my teenage son was performing in two musicals. For anyone not in the know, this open-air theatre, carved into the cliff and overlooking the spectacular Porthcurno Bay, was built almost singlehandedly by the artist Rowena Cade in the late 1920s. It's not the most comfortable theatre to sit in – bring cushions! – but the views are unsurpassable and the atmosphere second to none.

For the members of the British Theatre Academy, Manchester Youth and the Minack Theatre who got to perform that week, it was an unforgettable experience. It was also hard work – but that's nothing compared with the youngsters performing in shows on a professional basis, week in, week out. On page 40, Matthew Hemley speaks to children who have worked professionally, as well as parents, casting agents and creatives, to understand what life as a child performer is really like.

After the last show at the Minack, us parents were drafted in to help with the get-out – easier said than done at a venue that has more than 100 steps. The solution was a human chain, each of us on a different step so that we only had to pass a heavy object like a desk or chair to the person standing on the step above. It was enormous fun (and a good workout!).

By contrast, the logistics of moving a professional, full-scale, touring show from one regional theatre to another are on a whole other level. As Tim Bano finds on page 30, it all comes down to how many trucks a musical can fit into. It's a challenge – but one that many producers seem keen to take on, if the number of new shows touring the UK this autumn is anything to go by.

While the views at the Minack are breathtaking, the weather can be variable. Two shows were cancelled due to storms of biblical proportions; at another, it was too hot (you won't find any shade at this theatre) – but at least there was a welcome sea breeze. This was sadly not the case when I attended *Crazy for You* (my second outing) at the Gillian Lynne Theatre during the recent heatwave. The air conditioning was, I was told, working at full capacity – but this is a show that uses a *lot* of lights. No matter: once the curtain rose, we were all duly transported to the improbable glamour of Zangler's Follies, by way of a suitably arid Deadrock, Nevada. Charlie Stemp was, once again, a revelation but the surprise for me this time was Carly Anderson's understudy Kate Parr. Her singing was sublime, her dancing effortless, her comedic timing spot on – and she barely broke a sweat.

It's always lovely when performers get an unexpected chance to shine, and while understudies and alternates are two different things (an alternate 'shares' a role with the lead, albeit for fewer performances), we're delighted that Emily Benjamin – a long-time Alternate Sally Bowles – is to star, in her own right, in new musical *Bronco Billy* (see page 6). We're thrilled, too, that our cover star Rachel Tucker has been announced as the Alternate Norma Desmond in the forthcoming production of *Sunset Boulevard* at the Savoy Theatre. 'Alternate' doesn't seem like the right label here: this is a chance, after all, to see a bona fide star flex her vocal muscles in a role that, as Edward Seckerson says in his interview with her (see page 24), she was born to play.

Lloyd Webber's sumptuous score is another reason to get a ticket. I just hope we get to see the orchestra in all its glory, rather than buried away. There was never any danger of that being the case with John Wilson's newest recording, of course – his *Oklahoma!* puts the orchestra centre stage; you can read David Benedict's interview with him on page 36, and our review on page 68.

Speaking of reviews, you may have noticed an additional section devoted to books in this issue. As we prepare to head into the festive season with all its associated celebrations, this could be the perfect gift guide.

I couldn't sign off without mentioning another celebration – our first birthday! Once again, we'll be at Musical Con (21-22 October – musicalcon.co.uk), where we launched last year. If you're coming, do pop by stand MP20 and say hello.

Sarah.

Editor, Musicals
sarah.kirkup@markallengroup.com

INTRODUCING THIS ISSUE'S FEATURED BOOK REVIEWERS...

David Krane is a composer, arranger and orchestrator. His Goin' Hollywood musical recently premiered, and he created new dance arrangements for the West End's Crazy for You. He has composed dance music for over 35 Broadway shows, and score arrangements for films like Chicago and Mary Poppins.

On page 74, he reviews a book on the links between Disney and Broadway.

Paul Vale has been a theatre critic and feature writer for The Stage for 25 years, focusing on cabaret, Musical Theatre and design. He has also contributed to US publication Make-up Artist Magazine and Musical Theatre Review, and is a member of the Critics' Circle.

You can read his two articles, Bring Back That Show! and Venue Focus, on page 10, and his book review on page 73.

Sophie Thomas is a writer and journalist. She previously led editorial efforts at Encore Tickets for two years, and then served as London Theatre's associate editor from 2020-2023, covering a wide variety of West End and fringe shows.

Sophie currently works in content for a leading UK clothing retailer, and writes for several publications. You can read her book reviews on pages 72 and 74.

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Curtain Up!

The latest Musical Theatre news, plus exclusive interviews, reports and competitions

Emily Benjamin takes centre stage

Fans of the immersive West End revival of *Cabaret* have long known that, alongside its brilliant, oft-changing, leads – from Eddie Redmayne and Jessie Buckley through to current duo Jake Shears and Rebecca Lucy Taylor – there has always been one constant star.

That is Emily Benjamin, tireless swing and Alternate Sally Bowles. Benjamin, who has been with *Cabaret* since the beginning, drew wider attention when she performed the mighty title number at West End Live last year. As *Musicals* writer Matt Wolf told us, Benjamin is 'the unspoken glue that has kept the production going, across multiple leading ladies, with verve and commitment – not to mention filling in for a range of entirely different performers.'

Now Benjamin is set to star in the UK premiere of *Bronco Billy – The Musical* at Charing Cross Theatre in 2024. This musical comedy based on the Clint Eastwood movie follows a group of misfits in a travelling Wild West show, whose lives are turned upside down by the arrival of an heiress (Benjamin) on the run. Benjamin said she was delighted to be in a show 'that says you can be whatever you want to be – if that's a powerful woman, a disco dancer, a poet, a performer, a cowboy'.

■ Another super-swing, Callum Bell, saved the day recently when he stepped in as Nicely Nicely Johnson in *Guys & Dolls* at the Bridge Theatre. Lily Dyble, the show's assistant director, praised this 'massive undertaking' and said the audience 'went wild for Callum'. Who knows: perhaps he'll be the next to lead his own show? Let's hear it for the swings!

For more information about Bronco Billy – The Musical, visit broncobillymusical.com

Philanthropist helps buy Hammerstein's historic family farm

The Oscar Hammerstein Museum and Theatre Education Center (OHMTEC) has announced the acquisition of Highland Farm, the family home and creative hub of lyricist and librettist Oscar Hammerstein II. The purchase was made possible through a $500,000 gift from the estate of philanthropist Ronald Franklin Pratt.

Greg Roth, OHMTEC board president, expressed his gratitude: 'This generous donation, along with all of those who have contributed along the way, is an important part of preserving and protecting this historic property and the legacy of Oscar Hammerstein, the lyricist, the librettist, mentor and humanitarian.'

Highland Farm, located in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, is where Hammerstein crafted some of his greatest works, including *The Sound of Music*, *Carousel*, *The King and I*, *Oklahoma!* and *South Pacific*. It also served as a mentorship hub for young talents like Stephen Sondheim.

OHMTEC aims to prepare the property for public use, restoring the home and creating a museum with a strong theatre education component.

For more information, visit hammersteinmuseum.org; read about John Wilson's Oklahoma! recording on page 36, plus our review on page 68

LATEST LONDON CASTINGS NEWS

There has been a slew of recent cast announcements. New West End additions to *Back to the Future: The Musical* include Sarah Goggin as Lorraine Baines, Jay Perry as Goldie Wilson, Jordan Pearson as Biff and Lee Ormsby as Strickland.

Luke Kempner (Thénardier), Katie Hall (Fantine), Will Callan (Marius), Amena El-Kindy (Éponine) and Djavan van de Fliert (Enjolras) have joined *Les Misérables*, while Tanisha Spring and Dom Simpson now lead *Moulin Rouge!* as Satine and Christian.

Finally, *The Witches has* announced the full cast for its National Theatre premiere, including Katherine Kingsley as the Grand High Witch, Daniel Rigby as Mr Stringer and Sally Ann Triplett as Gran.

Don't miss our feature on The Witches in the next issue of Musicals magazine

Spamalot returns to Broadway

Grab your coconuts and get ready to find your grail: *Monty Python's Spamalot* returns, sillier (we hope) than ever. The musical comedy begins a new run at Broadway's St James Theatre this November, starring James Monroe Iglehart as King Arthur, Jimmy Smagula as Sir Bedevere, Michael Urie as Sir Robin, Nik Walker as Sir Galahad and Leslie Rodriguez Kritzer as the Lady of the Lake.

In other Broadway news, a musical version of *The Outsiders* (based on the novel and the Francis Ford Coppola movie) is heading to the Bernard B Jacobs Theatre in March 2024, following a run at the LaJolla Playhouse.

Win tickets to Box Office Radio's musicals event

Box Office Radio has announced its highly anticipated VIP Musicals Weekender, set to take place from 19-22 January 2024 in the charming seaside town of Torquay. The event promises an unforgettable weekend of stagey fun, featuring renowned West End stars like Kerry Ellis, Lee Mead, Lucie Jones, Rob Houchen, Alice Fearn, Cassidy Janson, Michael D Xavier and Rachel John.

The Riviera Hotel serves as the backdrop for this exclusive weekend retreat. VIP guests will be treated to five sessions of live performances, including tributes to *Jersey Boys* and *Mamma Mia!,* along with unique acts like drag sensation Kara Van-Park.

Josh Haywood, owner of Box Office Radio, said: 'We are thrilled to be hosting this amazing event, bringing together some of the West End's biggest and brightest names to the South West for a weekend of non-stop Musical Theatre entertainment.' Singer Lee Mead added that he couldn't 'wait to be a part of the Box Office Weekender with such a great line-up'.

Box Office Radio is offering *Musicals* readers the chance to win a prize worth £1,000, including a hotel room for two at the Riviera Hotel; three nights of dinner, bed and breakfast; exclusive access to all the entertainment sessions; and a VIP goodie bag filled with MT memorabilia.

To enter, visit musicalsmagazine.com/competitions

Song from new musical Duet to premiere at Music for Youth Proms

Our very own Jack Pepper is having part of his new musical *Duet* performed by 1,500 young musicians at the Royal Albert Hall as part of the Music for Youth Proms. The composer and reviewer (read his album review on page 67) told us back in our launch issue how writing musicals was not for the faint-hearted: 'You give so much of yourself for so long, yet nothing is certain.' How heartening, then, that a musical he began working on in lockdown will be heard by up to 6,000 people each night, and also shared with even more through a live recording to be aired on Scala Radio and Jazz FM.

At the heart of *Duet* is, says Pepper, 'a person who falls in love with someone through music'. It's based on the true story of his piano teacher Mike, who soon turns 80, and thus puts the piano front and centre; in fact, in this two-hander show, the piano is almost 'a third character', with the score largely inspired by classical music.

During a workshop in March, facilitated by The Lowry in Salford, Norwich Theatre and Southampton MAST Mayflower Studios, two new songs were born. One of them, 'In Tune' – celebrating music teaching – is being performed on 14 and 15 November; it's a perfect fit for Music for Youth, which supports young people on their musical journey. The 'anthemic pop song' is being taught in UK schools, to be sung alongside a soloist, pianist, big band, brass band and orchestra in a new arrangement by Pepper, who has also orchestrated a medley of three other songs from *Duet* for the event.

There are plans for a studio recording of 'In Tune', as well as a complete concert performance of *Duet* next May. Watch this space...

For details, visit mfy.org.uk; jackpeppermusician.com

Two very different Christmas crackers

'Tis the season – almost! – for festive shows, and theatregoers have plenty of treats in store. Fans of the Will Ferrell comedy movie and its jolly stage musical adaptation will be delighted to find *Elf* in their stocking this year. Or, more accurately, playing at the Dominion Theatre from 15 November. *Emmerdale*'s Matthew Wolfenden stars as Buddy, and the cast also features Georgina Castle, Tom Chambers, Rebecca Lock and Kim Ismay.

For something completely different, hit parody musical *Unfortunate: The Untold Story of Ursula the Sea Witch* is at Southwark Playhouse Elephant from 8 December, ahead of a UK tour. This *Little Mermaid* take-off promises oceans of 'naughty-cal' fun.

For more Christmas inspiration, check out our pantomime feature in the next issue

Mountview Academy teams up with Crossroads Live

Leading panto producer Crossroads Live is joining forces with Mountview Academy of Theatre Arts for a four-year partnership with the aim of fostering accessibility in the arts. Crossroads Live's £100,000 scholarship support will benefit dozens of students pursuing undergraduate courses in Musical Theatre, acting and actor musicianship.

For more information, visit mountview.org.uk

Attention! New ADHD musical on tour

Another exciting new musical, *ADHD The Musical: Can I Have Your Attention Please?*, tours the UK this autumn. Written by Dora Colquhoun, a neurodivergent theatre-maker and performer from Liverpool who collaborated with neuroscientist Joydeep Bhattacharya, this honest and entertaining show explores the challenges of adult ADHD diagnosis.

The show began its tour on 20 September and will visit venues across the UK. BSL interpretation will be available at most of the shows.

For more information, visit doraviolet.co.uk/tour

Plenty to smile about at new musical showcase BEAM

Musical Theatre Network (MTN) and Mercury Musical Developments (MMD) recently hosted the fourth BEAM industry showcase, shining a spotlight on new Musical Theatre creations across the UK. BEAM2023 was the first showcase held outside London, taking place at the Oxford Playhouse this May, and was a huge success.

More than 300 industry professionals attended, as well as 188 participants. There were some notable firsts this year, including the first musical in a BEAM showcase designed for a visually impaired cast (*Otto Weidt's Brush & Broom Workshop for the Blind* by Caitlyn Burt and Amir Shoenfeld), and the first BEAM musical by a writer of Gypsy/Romany/Traveller heritage (*Mind Your Business* by Gemma Lees). The next BEAM event is provisionally scheduled for May 2025, so mark your calendars now!

In other MTN/MMD news, Dylan Townley has been announced as the 2023 Cameron Mackintosh Resident Musical Theatre Composer, to be on placement at the Octagon Theatre, Bolton, from October.

Read more about Otto Weidt's Brush & Broom Workshop on page 21

PHOTOGRAPHY: Matt Crockett / Alick Cotterill / ABPhotography / Steve Gregson / David Ovenden

Interval Chatter

Wait for it... Hamilton creator **Lin-Manuel Miranda** is reportedly working on a new musical adaptation of novel The Warriors, based around New York City street gangs in the 1960s

BRIT School North, a anew branch of the famous BRIT School, is due to open in Bradford in 2026/27, training up the stars of tomorrow

Loved the Bette Midler movie? Good news: stage adaptation **Beaches the Musical** will premiere at Theatre Calgary in 2024, following an industry reading in New York this October

Clare Burt has joined the starry **Stephen Sondheim's Old Friends** after Haydn Gwynne had to withdraw

New musical **Babies** will have three staged concert performances at the Lyric, Shaftesbury Avenue, in November

SIX has welcomed its new West End Queens: Nikki Bentley, Thao Therese Nguyen, Kayleigh McKnight, Reca Oakley, Inez Budd and Janiq Charles

Marianne Elliott's acclaimed gender-swapped revival of **Company** will tour North America, starring Britney Coleman and Judy McLane

Nicole Raquel Dennis will play the pivotal role of Martha Percy, leading the autumn tour of musical **Treason**; Joe McFadden plays King James

The Choir of Man has teamed up with **The Theatre Cafe** to create a permanent installation. Now, you can sup themed drinks like 50 Ways to Drink your Lager

Need a one-stop shop for your London show tickets? **Musicals** can help: visit musicalsmagazine.com/buy-tickets

Countdown to...

Opening Night

David Hunter is getting into shape ahead of The Time Traveller's Wife hitting the West End

How are rehearsals?
It's very different this time around. Leading up to the Chester run last year, I thought it would be more of a concert and then arrived to find a double revolve, LED screens, all the illusions fully realised, and 39 costumes to contend with! I remember wishing that the lines were already in my head, so I'm relieved to be returning to it with all that knowledge in my back pocket.

PHOTOGRAPHY: Danny Kaan

David Hunter previewing the show at Ronnie Scott's

Has the cast grown?
In Chester, we didn't have any covers. No one even whispered the word 'Covid' – every night we had investors and producers in, so it would have been game over. For London, we have a full range of understudies and swings, and the ensemble will be more involved.

How is Dave Stewart and Joss Stone's music?
They're songs I'd love to have written. The music is embedded now, especially since the cast recording; it's a shrine to where we were at the time – it even includes a song that was cut in Chester.

How physical a role is time-traveller Henry?
It's the most physical show I've had to do. There's a great moment when I walk offstage with [Henry's wife] Clare [played by Joanna Woodward], hand in hand, and as soon as I'm out of sight I run as fast as I can, in pitch darkness, while ripping off all my clothes, and then immediately arrive back onstage completely naked. This time, I've started going to the gym. And I never go to the gym!

How's your chemistry with Joanna Woodward?
Chemistry boils down to two actors who invest in each other, who channel one another's energy. In Chester, neither of us knew if the show would have a further life or even if they'd ask us again. Now we know it's ours, we're relaxing into it and finding even more layers.

The show is adapted from a beloved book...
It's a pressure because everyone has read it and knows who they want Henry to be, but I'm trying to approach the text as I would any other. It helped that I first read it knowing I'd be playing Henry, so I imagined me when I was reading it.

How do you approach opening night?
I don't drink, I don't smoke, I always eat lightly before a show. There will be butterflies, but I try to play it down: 'It's just singing, acting and messing about.' But then you look back and remember you've done something incredible. This is everything I ever dreamed of doing.

As told to Sarah Kirkup

The Time Traveller's Wife opens on 7 October at the Apollo Theatre, Shaftesbury Avenue – for tickets, visit timetravellerswife.com

Closing Night

Jocasta Almgill prepares to say goodbye to Rizzo in Grease at the Dominion Theatre

What are your feelings leading up to the final performances?
It's very bittersweet. Rizzo was one of my dream roles to play, and the run has just been amazing, but like all good things it has to come to an end at some point.

You also played Rizzo as part of the 2022 cast at the Dominion. How has it changed this time?
The majority of the cast are different, although we had a couple of people who stayed on. I'd never returned to a show before, and for me it felt like a real challenge to come back with another cast and try to re-create magic. But actually, it was great that Paul [French] and Solomon [Davy], my Kenickies, are so different. I got to experience a different relationship with each of them, and then in turn I found different Rizzos.

How have audiences reacted to a show that has such an indelibly popular film version?
Last year we had a lot of diehard *Grease* fans and they would get dressed up, which is amazing. But we are definitely getting a more diverse crowd now, which is really cool. Nikolai [Foster, director] has done an amazing job of switching it up and allowing us as actors to really just run with it. I think people are coming and being pleasantly surprised by the version that we're doing. It has depth. And it's so bizarre how it's still relevant now.

PHOTOGRAPHY: Johan Persson

Jocasta Almgill will miss her 'dream role' of Rizzo

What sort of roles would you like to tackle next?
I want to play roles that push the boundaries. Representation really does matter. As a biracial woman, playing a role like Rizzo that isn't necessarily associated with the BIPOC community, I just feel so grateful to have been able to show so many people that. I would definitely love more of that in my career, to push the boundaries and really help make Musical Theatre the diverse environment that it deserves to be, and should be. So yes, you'll be seeing more of me!

What will you miss the most?
The exercise! Thanks to the show, I don't have to go to the gym; I can eat what I want. I'm playing an 18-year-old, I'm running around the stage, and I'm fitter than I actually was at 18. So I'm going to miss having that motivation and the free cardio. And the Dominion is such an amazing venue. Singing 'There Are Worse Things I Could Do' on that stage is an experience I'll never forget, and I've relished every moment of it.

As told to Scott Matthewman

The run of Grease closes on 28 October at the Dominion Theatre – for tickets and more information, visit greasemusical.co.uk

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THE LITTLE BIG THINGS

A NEW MUSICAL

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Bring Back That Show!

Jerry Herman's Mame

There are three Jerry Herman musicals that have undergone notable major revivals since their initial West End runs: *Hello, Dolly!*, *La Cage aux Folles* and *Mack & Mabel*.

However, the UK has yet to see a large-scale production of *Mame* since Ginger Rogers starred in the 1969 UK premiere at the Theatre Royal Drury Lane.

Based on Patrick Dennis's 1955 semi-autobiographical novel, and book writers Jerome Lawrence and Robert Edwin Lee's 1956 play, the story centres on Patrick, a young child of conservative parents who has been orphaned and is entrusted to his eccentric Aunt Mame. She is a freewheeling bohemian, with an eclectic group of friends and a chaotic lifestyle.

When Mame loses her fortune in the Wall Street Crash, she gamely turns her hand to several jobs until she meets a rich Southern plantation owner, Beauregard. While Mame is on her extended honeymoon, Patrick grows into a snob and falls for the equally uptight Gloria. Fate brings Mame back to the US as a wealthy widow, in time to save Patrick from himself and introduce him to his future wife.

The original production on Broadway starred Angela Lansbury as Mame, who played opposite the indomitable Bea Arthur as Vera Charles, Mame's dipsomaniac pal. It was nominated for eight Tony Awards and won three for the performances by Lansbury, Arthur and Frankie Michaels, who played the young Patrick. Yet it lost Best New Musical to *Man of La Mancha* – go figure?

An ill-advised movie followed in 1974 starring Lucille Ball in what was to be one of the actress's final screen appearances. Fortunately, it did showcase Arthur in her Tony-winning role, but otherwise the film was a critical and commercial flop.

Tracie Bennett (centre) in the Hope Mill's revival

However, the musical is packed with classic songs – like 'We Need a Little Christmas', 'Bosom Buddies' and the wonderful title number – and it remains a staple in touring and dinner theatre across America. In fact, its ubiquity is such that it's a gag in the 2004 movie *Connie and Carla*.

Yet for all its continued popularity in the US, we hadn't had a production here for 50 years, until the small-but-mighty Hope Mill Theatre in Manchester mounted a long overdue revival in 2019 starring Tracie Bennett as Mame and Harriet Thorpe as Vera. Out of necessity it was a pared-down production, but it was nevertheless extremely well received.

The musical's overarching themes endorse tolerance and empathy. When faced with disaster, Mame refuses to sink into a depression and embraces life with all its highs and lows. The book is packed with humour and the West End is hardly short of fabulous leading ladies who could do justice to the songs, the comedy and the show's indomitable spirit.

Paul Vale

Venue Focus

Hope Mill Theatre, Manchester

Where? Pollard Street, on the banks of the Ashton Canal, Ancoats, Manchester.

Significant dates The venue was established in November 2015; a staging of Jason Robert Brown's *Parade*, the first of many musical productions, opened in May 2016, directed by James Baker. The following year, the venue won for Special Achievement and Best Fringe Production for *Moth* at the Manchester Theatre Awards, and in 2018 it also won Fringe Venue of the Year at *The Stage* Awards. Then, in 2021, it launched the Hope Mill Theatre School, providing young local people with affordable drama training.

The theatre, originally a cotton mill

Architect The Grade II*-listed, seven-storey building was originally a cotton mill built in 1824. It was purchased and refurbished by the Hope Mill Partnership in 2001. In 2014, the empty engine room was transformed into a theatre designed by David French.

Capacity 145

About Although only operating for less than a decade, the Hope Mill Theatre has established itself as a Musical Theatre powerhouse. Performers William Whelton and Joseph Houston had moved to the area from London, initially seeking other employment, but were soon struck by how the London fringe model might work equally well there. They immediately set about looking for a space, eventually finding the Hope Mill site on Gumtree.

After pitching to the landlords and applying for a small business loan, the partners opened the venue as quickly as possible with free furniture, borrowed lighting and a £10 piano. The venue currently boasts its own café, bar and restaurant adjacent to the theatre and there is now a rehearsal studio available to hire.

Following the pandemic, the Hope Mill's owners made a strategic move from privately owned company to being operated by a registered charity, A Factory of Creativity. This will allow the theatre to unlock more funding opportunities and secure its future as a major focus for the performing arts in Manchester.

When *Parade* was co-produced with Katy Lipson's company Aria Entertainment, it was the beginning of a fruitful relationship, with many of their subsequent productions, such as *Hair, Pippin* and *Rags,* transferring to fringe venues in London or touring.

In 2019 the Hope Mill played host to the Jerry Herman musical *Mame* (see our article above) starring Tracie Bennett. The revival was nominated for no fewer than seven WhatsOnStage Awards and transferred to both the Royal & Derngate in Northampton and the Salisbury Playhouse. This October sees an exciting world premiere: *To Wong Foo The Musical*, based on the 1995 cult movie.

Read our review of To Wong Foo The Musical in the next issue

Paul Vale

PHOTOGRAPHY: Pamela Raith

From the Green Room

There's an art to interviewing, whether for print or radio or onstage. And, says **Edward Seckerson**, particularly when it comes to Musical Theatre stars, one must be prepared for the unexpected

I cannot even begin to calculate how many interviews I have done over the course of my journalistic career – but beyond the numbers are the very different dynamics required for print, audio and live-with-audience formats. I've had countless offers to broadcast excerpts from my 1989 interview with Leonard Bernstein for the front cover of *Gramophone* magazine. But that ancient cassette tape (remember them?) lurking somewhere in my basement is private: out of bounds to all but my ears. There's another one containing my first encounter with Paul McCartney (is that musical version of *It's a Wonderful Life* still on the cards, I wonder?). But that's private, too – the audio equivalent of making notes and taking down quotes in shorthand. There were two machines running on that occasion – mine and the publicist's. 'For the archive,' I was told. For the lawyers, more like.

When I say 'private' I am referring to an intimate and informal conversation which will eventually get shaped into a piece of prose with quotations. The recording, the *aide-mémoire*, was never intended to be listened to. It is less structured (go where the conversation takes you, enjoy the digressions), less 'presentational' than when a live audience is privy to it and where the tone of it – the stories, the anecdotes – is actively set up with the audience's 'entertainment' in mind.

Radio falls somewhere between the other two formats, and during my six years presenting BBC Radio 3's *Stage and Screen* I pretty much exhausted access to the great and the good of Musical Theatre on both sides of the pond. The list, looking back on it, is pretty jaw-dropping. Radio needs to be lean and focused – and the one hour of airtime for this show was geared towards very specific song choices. Failure to keep things on track without inhibiting either myself or my guest could mean hours of complex editing. My producer, the estimable Bill Lloyd, was a master in that regard but we were a weekly show; there wasn't the time to unpick rambling interviews.

Above Our author with Patricia Routledge... **Below** ... and with Patti LuPone

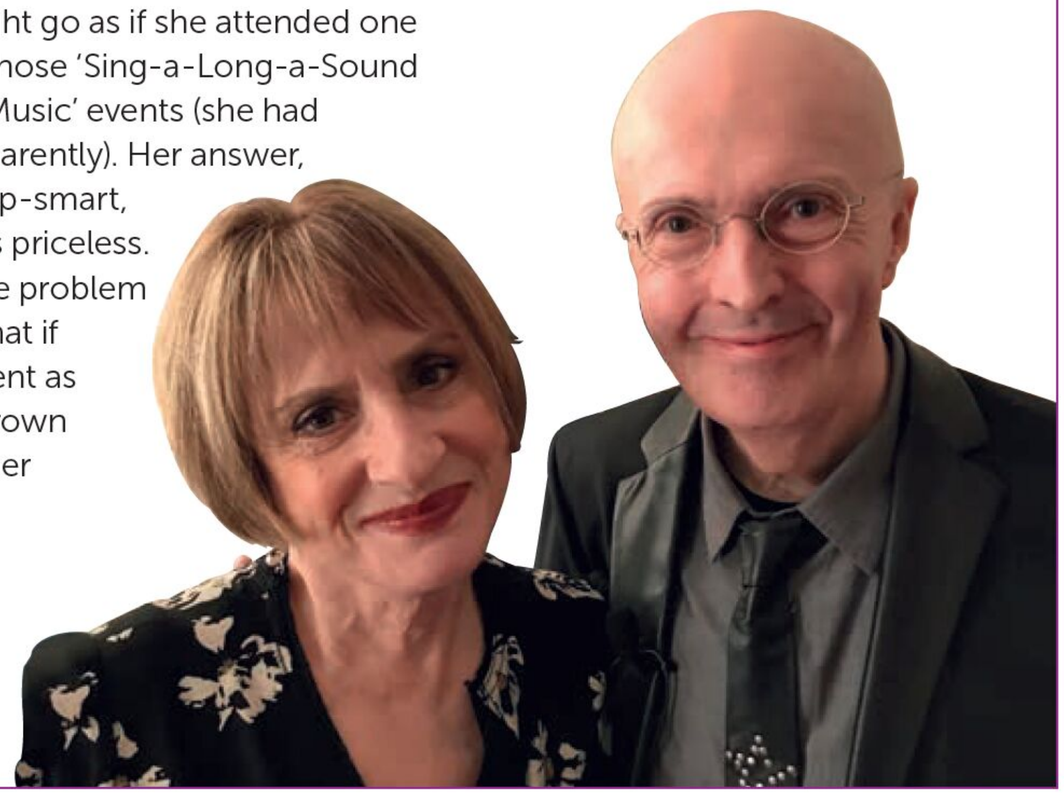
Not everything always went according to plan. Liza Minnelli decided to take off for Paris when we were scheduled to record a 'special' in New York – and when we did reschedule (at huge expense) she *only* wanted to talk about Kander and Ebb in the aftermath of Fred Ebb's death.

That was in an NYC studio. Angela Lansbury was on home turf in Ireland in the comfort of her own surroundings when we recorded her two shows. I remember she laid on tea and homemade cakes, providing me with a gift of a segue into the second programme which began by referencing Mrs Potts from *Beauty and the Beast*! But contrast that with Julie Andrews who was bound into a tight sequence of interviews at the Dorchester Hotel (David Frost and a TV crew were in the next room); in one hour I had to deliver enough material for a 90-minute Christmas show. No pressure.

I asked for the machines to be running when she arrived (we had met before) so I could start proceedings, without seeming to have started at all, with reference to a disc I'd been revisiting of her celebrated singing teacher Lilian Stiles-Allen. That was both a surprise and an ice-breaker and immediately put Andrews at ease, paradoxically by catching her off guard. I also doubt that anyone has ever asked what she might go as if she attended one of those 'Sing-a-Long-a-Sound of Music' events (she had apparently). Her answer, whip-smart, was priceless. 'The problem is that if I went as a brown paper package tied up with string someone's bound to say "Ooh look, there's Julie Andrews!"'

Michael Parkinson once said that interviewing was all about instilling trust and a sense of security in your guests. And there's no better test of that than in a live interview. You *earn* your trust with someone like Patricia Routledge (working with her on our 'Facing the Music' event has been an honour and a joy). There can be no substitute for intensive homework. Showing that you are informed and, better yet, genuinely admiring of the work is essential. But you need to go further: chapter and verse, detail. The likes of Patti LuPone – with whom I enjoyed an unforgettable evening event at the Theatre Royal Haymarket – will have you for breakfast if not.

Though I had known her for some years before this event (while she was here in London with *Company*) I was incredibly nervous. And right up to the moment we walked onstage following 'Rainbow High' from *Evita* I didn't really have an opening gambit. The audience went nuts – of course. And that's when it came to me: 'So this is how it feels to be Patti LuPone!' Bingo. It was a line that said, 'At ease everybody – this is a celebration.' And it was. M



Failure to keep things on track without inhibiting either myself or my guest could mean hours of complex editing

PHOTOGRAPHY: Danny Kaan

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Elaine's Page

Mamma Mia!

Musical Theatre legend **Elaine Paige** looks at what made this ABBA-inspired musical such a smash hit and says Gimme! Gimme! Gimme! more!

If you'd just landed from Mars and I said to you, 'Would you like me to transport you to a beautiful Greek island for the evening? We're going to lose ourselves in a light-hearted story about a girl, Sophie, who wants her father at her wedding, but she doesn't know who he is because her mother had a bit too much fun in the sun, so she invites her three potential dads... Oh, *and* we're going to dance our platform boots off to ABBA hits like "Take a Chance on Me", "SOS", "Super Trouper" and "Voulez-Vous"...' You'd say, 'Yes please, Elaine!' wouldn't you?! Who wouldn't?!

Having been seen by a whopping 65 million people around the world – and who knows how many Martians – *Mamma Mia!* is one of theatre's biggest success stories. Producer Judy Craymer had the idea of turning the insanely catchy songs of ABBA into a stage show, and it's paid off a thousandfold. Its box-office figures are still as eye-watering as its '70s jumpsuits, some 24 years after it debuted.

The show changed the theatre landscape forever; not just because it's pure escapism, but also because it's jam-packed with songs we already know and love, making it the ultimate jukebox musical. 'Jukebox musical' is a term we hear an awful lot now in Musical Theatre, but these days there are jukebox musicals... and then there's *Mamma Mia!*.

I took a keen interest in the show right from the beginning, when news of it first started rippling around in the late 1990s. Not only had I worked closely with ABBA's Benny Andersson and Björn Ulvaeus on *Chess*, I also appeared as Carabosse a year earlier in *ABBAcadabra*.

Above Mazz Murray's Donna **Right** Paige in ABBAcadabra

The forerunner to *Mamma Mia!*, *ABBAcadabra* was another musical based on ABBA's music, with a story inspired by children's fairy tales. Carabosse was the witch who guarded the enchanted forest. It premiered in December 1983 as a Christmas season show at the Lyric Theatre in Hammersmith, where it played to full houses for eight weeks.

In it I performed a rewritten version of ABBA's 'My Love, My Life' called 'Like an Image Passing By', which I then released as a single. It's incredible to think that Benny and Björn's music had only been known to the world for 10 years when we embarked on *ABBAcadabra* and *Chess* – the world now knows that their music is timeless and everlasting. And that's in no small part thanks to *Mamma Mia!*.

Mamma Mia! is at the Novello Theatre now, but it premiered in 1999 at the Prince Edward, which is where I first saw it. Siobhán McCarthy originated the role of Donna, Sophie's mother. She'd been in the original production of *Evita* with me at that very theatre, so that made it all the more memorable. As for the show itself... Well, aside from the colourful riot of lycra, sequins, rhinestones and dungarees, of course, I felt connected to the material and the creators. I had the most wonderful time imaginable. Joyful abandon was 'The Name of the Game'.

Nine years after *Mamma Mia!* became a worldwide smash we got the camp, fluffy film adaptation, starring Meryl Streep and Amanda Seyfried as Donna and Sophie, and Pierce Brosnan, Stellan Skarsgård and Colin Firth as Sophie's three dad contenders.

A decade later, the gang reunited for *Mamma Mia! Here We Go Again* – and history really did repeat itself, because this time round Sophie returned home to face life as a single mother, just as her mum did before her.

> **You can always be the dancing queen, you don't have to be young and sweet and 17. That's a big thumbs up from me!**

And if a hit stage show and two hugely popular films aren't enough, ABBA's songbook is about to get another workout in the new TV series *Mamma Mia! I Have a Dream*, which will launch a nationwide search to find two ingénues to play the roles of Sophie and her fiancé Sky in the West End production. Musical Theatre hopefuls will have to navigate their way through challenges, masterclasses and performances. It's one way to end up at the biggest party in town, that's for sure!

Before I finish, I must also add that I especially love *Mamma Mia!* because it celebrates women – and women of a certain age, at that. It's unusual to see a show in which the male characters come out looking completely ridiculous. They're dopes, albeit lovable dopes, while the women are gorgeous and wonderful.

That makes it such a hopeful piece. It shows the possibilities of living a good life as a woman: not a dream-come-true perfect life, but a good life. Yes, the story is silly, but at the heart of it is the message that it's totally fine to be a woman, whatever age you are and whatever stage you're at in life. That 'Dancing Queen' is sung by the middle-aged Donna proves this perfectly: you can always be the dancing queen, you don't have to be young and sweet and 17. That's a big thumbs up from me! M

Visit mamma-mia.com for more details or tickets to Mamma Mia!; 'Elaine Paige on Sunday' is on BBC Radio 2 at 1pm; follow her on X @elaine_paige

PHOTOGRAPHY: Nicky Johnston / Brinkhoff-Moegenburg / Donald Cooper

A Day in the Life of...

Joseph Beagley, head of masks & puppets

Since joining The Lion King's creative team as a casual masks and puppets assistant in 2005, Joseph has worked his way up to running the department – and no day ever looks the same

Morning routine

For the early shift, I'll arrive at the Lyceum Theatre at 9.30am. I always cycle in – in all weathers. I tend to skip breakfast though; I don't even drink tea or coffee. There are six in our department, four assistants (myself included) and two production painters. A production painter's job is solely refurbishment and touch-up work, whereas the rest of us do that too but we're also involved in the logistics of the show itself.

Maintenance tasks

The two of us who arrive for the early shift will go through all the puppets used the night before, looking at any touch-ups that need to happen. There are 250 puppets used in every show, so it's inevitable that some of them will get knocked or broken. The performers don't hold back, and I wouldn't want them to. We'll have handover notes from the two assistants who worked on the previous show, which saves time. Our main aim is to make sure everything is show-ready. From the moment the curtain comes down, the clock is ticking until the next show starts.

New builds

Our Mufasa mask is made of carbon fibre – it's light and strong, and its strength-to-weight ratio is incomparable, but it's not indestructible. It will often crack, so we'll patch it with more carbon fibre and paint it. The mane, too, will sometimes snap and break off – it's made of balsa wood, which is quite fragile – so we'll have to repair it.

Above Handcrafted masks in The Lion King **Below left** Beagley hard at work

Some of our masks have had so many repairs over the years that they become unwieldy. If this happens, we order a new raw carbon head that comes out of a mould – and then we paint it, and attach ears and other parts, which we make from scratch in-house. We're in the process of building a new Pumbaa puppet at the moment – the current one is seven years old and made of foam, which looks tired compared to other puppets made of harder material.

Lunchbreak and legacy

The two assistants on the morning shift won't take their lunch until the remaining two assistants arrive for the later shift at 1.30pm. Generally people bring in a packed lunch, but I tend to run across the road to Tesco.

If there's not a matinee, the afternoon can be a good time to find that balance between evolving and preserving. *The Lion King* was developed 26 years ago, and technology has moved on exponentially in that time. The Scar and Mufasa mechanical masks were at the height of technology when first designed, but we've since been able to tweak things so that they're easier to maintain. The electrical components, for example, are smaller and more reliable now. And then there's 3D printing...

There are internal mechanical elements, such as the lever that makes Zazu's eyes blink – this used to be handmade out of metal, but it's now modelled on a computer and 3D-printed. Each one is identical, so if we're swapping out old components, we know they'll be compatible.

But we also have an obligation to stay true to the handmade nature of the external elements. That's why the 'creative associate' role is so important in maintaining consistency across all the shows. There are always going to be variables, and without that person the show could easily drift away from what it's supposed to be.

Incoming casts

In February we'll call the new cast in for their first fittings. They'll already have an idea of what they're getting themselves into, as we'll have brought certain elements – all the parts they'll be wearing – to the auditions.

It's fascinating: we've had people audition whose rendition of a character is sublime – but put the elements on them and they crumble. And then you might have someone else who is OK, but then you put the puppets on them and they suddenly just become someone else.

In mid-March, the six-week rehearsal period will begin, and one of us will be there with all the elements they'll need. (For everything you see onstage, there are spares – and they have to look as good as the main props.) So we have one assistant in the theatre doing repairs as normal, and another one at the rehearsal studio. We work longer hours, but that's the nature of the job.

Evening shift and show

The two early-shifters, plus the painters, clock off at 6.30pm. Just like the performers, the two assistants on duty for the evening show will have their 'tracks'. One will be mostly upstairs in our department, ready to run down with tools if needed. The other will be 'on the deck', and that's crucial as we may need to step in at a moment's notice.

A classic thing that can happen is with the Zazu puppet, where a wing string breaks. The principal Zazu has his own puppet, as does each understudy – and every puppet is tailored to that person in terms of rod tension. During a show we'll give the principal an understudy's puppet while we restring the broken one. You can always tell he's glad to get his own puppet back though – it's like putting your own shoes back on after wearing someone else's!

Downtime

If I clock off at 6.30pm, I might see another show featuring puppets – I'll try and catch *My Neighbour Totoro* when it comes back – or I'll cycle straight home. When I first started working in the department, I was studying as well – I couldn't do that now! M

For tickets to The Lion King, visit thelionking.co.uk

PHOTOGRAPHY: Johan Persson / Disney

All That Dazzles About Town

London-based blogger **Daz Gale** picks his personal highlights from an action-packed few weeks of attending Musical Theatre shows, concerts and events

19 JULY 2023

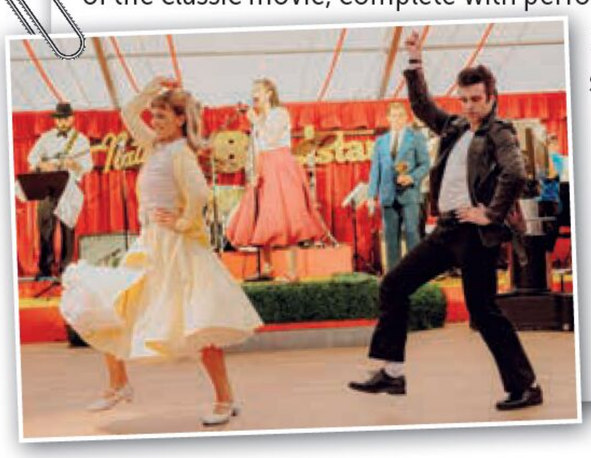
The Turbine Theatre in Battersea is no stranger to new musicals but this time it played host to a production in development when **Halls The Musical** by Jennifer Harrison and George Stroud enjoyed an outing where the audience's reaction and feedback is set to shape the show's journey. This story of nine students living together in shared accommodation is full of instantly memorable songs and quick-witted writing that will be loved by those who are fans of *Heathers* (there's even a not-so-subtle nod to that very show). I have no doubt that *Halls* will go on to have a bright and successful future.

24 JULY 2023

One of the most exciting new musicals returned to London when **Ride** parked its bicycle at **Southwark Playhouse Elephant** for a limited run. Based on the true story of Annie Londonderry – the first woman to cycle around the world – this show by Freya Catrin Smith and Jack Williams is going from strength to strength, managing to eclipse its already impressive 2022 run. Its exceptional writing and stirring songs were enhanced by a breathtaking performance from Liv Andrusier. It's clear to see why this show has been picking up the pace. I eagerly anticipate the news of where it's travelling to next.

27 JULY 2023

'Summer lovin' happened so fast', as did my outing to **Secret Cinema Presents Grease** – held in a car park at the **Birmingham NEC** which was transformed into Rydell High. It was a fabulous immersive experience which saw performances of a selection of songs, including the memorable hand-jive contest, pop up around the vast space before we all sat to watch a unique presentation of the classic movie, complete with performers recreating scenes under the massive screen. An electrifying addition to a well-loved legacy.



7 AUGUST 2023

Ahead of the London opening of his musical *Next to Normal*, Tom Kitt stopped by **Crazy Coqs** for **Tom Kitt: Reflections, A Solo Concert**. Performing songs from his impressive back catalogue, Kitt was joined by Caissie Levy, Jack Wolfe and Eleanor Worthington-Cox, treating audiences to a sneak peek of *Next to Normal* as well as numbers from his other shows including *Almost Famous* and *Freaky Friday*. Perhaps the most exciting moment came when Kerry Ellis tackled two numbers from *If/Then* which she has been linked to in a rumoured UK production. With performances as spectacular as these, let's hope the rumours are true. Throughout, Kitt proved what a wonderful writer he is and left me longing for more of his shows to hit the West End.

21 AUGUST 2023

Visiting the **London Palladium** when it played host to the English-language debut and European premiere of **Death Note: The Musical** was a real treat. Though it was deceptively billed as a concert, the production values were in fact jaw-droppingly impressive. Joaquin Pedro Valdes turned in a career-best performance, wowing audiences with his star turn as Light, his vocal battles with Dean John-Wilson's L surely among the best duets the West End has ever witnessed. Broadway star Adam Pascal joined the fun for a scene-stealing turn as Ryuk alongside West End favourites Aimie Atkinson and Frances Mayli McCann. With an atmosphere such as I've never witnessed before, this completely exhilarating show was Musical Theatre at its best.

22 AUGUST 2023

Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Phantom of the Opera* sequel **Love Never Dies** may not have had the most successful run when it hit the West End 13 years ago, but this time it found redemption in a concert staging with the London Musical Theatre Orchestra at **Theatre Royal Drury Lane**. With the legendary Norm Lewis donning the iconic mask and the always-wonderful Celinde Schoenmaker returning to the role of Christine, this was a very special performance indeed. While the book might still be questionable at best, producing the musical in concert form was an inspiring touch in that it shifted the emphasis to the soaring score, allowing it to shine. The rousing title number receiving a mid-show standing ovation suggested there may well yet be a future life for this musical, whether as a concert or as a fully-fledged production.

5 SEPTEMBER 2023

New musical **For Tonight** by Shenelle Salcido and Spencer Williams made its premiere for one night only at the **Adelphi Theatre**. Blending the traditions and languages of the Welsh and Romani peoples, the show explores the meaning of home and the diversity of culture. With a cast led by Jacob Young and Amy Di Bartolomeo, the vocals were out of this world with a rich score which, at its best, created some truly glorious sounds. For a first outing of the show, this was a pretty impressive production. It isn't quite perfect yet – the book needs a bit of tweaking and perhaps one or two songs could be cut – but it has a lot of potential and I'm excited to see where it ends up.

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PHOTOGRAPHY: Danny Kaan / Luke Dyson / Daz Gale / Mark Senior

Backstage with...

Linzi Hateley, who stars in The Little Big Things, an original British musical based on a true story, now playing at London's @sohoplace

Can you tell us about the musical?
It's a true story about a young man called Henry Fraser who went on holiday after he finished his exams. A few days into the holiday he dived into the sea and unfortunately he hit a sandbank. He became paralysed from the neck down.

The show is about how he and his family deal with that catastrophic news. Through his rehabilitation he learned how to become a mouth artist, and he now paints incredible paintings.

The music is sensational. The book has been written brilliantly, and at a recent performance the real Henry and his family saw the show and gave their seal of approval. Henry said it was the best night of his life. His story gives us all a bit of perspective on life and how you really can make the most out of the littlest of things.

You're playing Fran, Henry's mum – what's it like to portray a real person?
I'm not an impersonator; that's not my job. I've been very lucky to be part of the workshops right from the beginning, so I've been shaping the role from the start. It feels like it's been mine in a way. I'm a mum myself, and I have my own personal experiences that have not been easy, so I can relate to so many parts of this story. You grab whatever you can and bring that to life within the portrayal.

But I am aware of the real Fran, and in fact we went for coffee. We are very different in lots of ways, but three hours later it was still just two mums nattering away and talking about life and family. I told her: 'I'm not going to try and be you. It's my version of how I think I would feel in that situation.'

How do you look back on your first role in the critically mauled musical Carrie when you were 17?
It was a baptism of fire. I learned a lot on that first job and it's been a blessing and a curse. Now I can hold my head up high, but [then] I didn't even want to talk about it.

It's taken a long time for people to appreciate the bravery of that show. Even though it was bonkers and crazy, it was also bold and brilliant – I think that's why it's become a cult thing. But the reaction to it when I was 17 has stayed with me for life.

Despite the experience, you've sustained an extraordinary career over 35 years...
I was very fortunate that Cameron Mackintosh saw me and put me into *Les Mis* as Éponine. That made me go, 'OK, it's not my fault, I can do this'. I stayed with the show for a couple of years just to learn my craft.

What was it like to reprise your Narrator in Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat in 2021, after first playing the role 30 years earlier?
In a funny sort of way, more enjoyable. I'm very loyal to the original production though. The album went platinum in a week, it was insane. My daughter used to always say that the one show she wished she'd seen me do was *Joseph*, then she got to come to the Palladium and see me. My mum and dad were still around, and for them to see their daughter back there was amazing.

I didn't realise how powerful nostalgia was. Particularly off the back of the pandemic, people were so desperate for theatre again, but to have me and Jason [Donovan] back at the Palladium was insane. It was definitely a moment.

What has The Little Big Things taught you about the little things you can appreciate in life?
The thing I value most is my family. They've stuck with me through thick and thin. I have an exceptional daughter that I'm so proud of – she's playing Sophie in *Mamma Mia!* now. The fact that we're in the West End at the same time is unbelievable. M

As told to Tim Bano

The Little Big Things runs at @sohoplace until 25 November – visit sohoplace.org; read our review on page 49, and our review of Out for Blood: A Cultural History of Carrie the Musical on page 72

PHOTOGRAPHY: Shona Louise

BY DEFINITION...

Belt / verb – to sing and project from the chest in order to produce a big, high-intensity sound

This is the stereotypical sound of Musical Theatre: a singer in powerful voice belts out a showstopper that fills the theatre with its sheer force. There's plenty of debate about what exactly belting means, but it is generally considered to involve using the 'chest voice' (the lower part of your voice, where you speak from) rather than the higher 'head voice', even when singing notes in your head-voice range: a skilful and very effective combination.

However, belting requires a delicate balance between control and wild abandon in order to create a loud, bright, intense but colourful sound. Get it wrong and it can sound strained or go off-key, but get it right and it can be a mighty vehicle for big emotions – so ideal for the extremes of Musical Theatre.

Belting gained popularity after Ethel Merman's legendary performance in the 1930 show *Girl Crazy* (in particular in the song 'I Got Rhythm'), and is now a regular characteristic of the genre.

Behind The Song

Tim Minchin's 'When I Grow Up' from Matilda The Musical

The singer, pianist and songwriter **Joe Stilgoe** delves into the harmonic simplicity of the first song Tim Minchin wrote for the musical, and uncovers a torrent of bittersweet emotions

Roald Dahl, the scourge of lights-out curfews all over the world for more than 60 years, knew about growing up. He once said that the problem with most grown-ups is that they've forgotten what it was like to be a child. They lose the *magic*. As it says in *The Minpins,* the last children's story Dahl ever wrote, 'Those who don't believe in magic will never find it.'

Here lies the conundrum though – children want to grow up, but at the same time they don't want to leave behind the sweets, the chocolate cakes, the desire to watch telly without interruption, that belief in magic.

Enter a musical comedian with magic in his brain and his fingers, and an unmatched ability to distill massive notions into simple ideas.

Tim Minchin, adaptor of Dahl's world into this most glorious theatrical form, was obsessed with the idea of turning *Matilda* into a musical – he actually tried to acquire the rights when he was writing songs for theatre in his home town of Perth in the late '90s. Somehow it all happened at the perfect time, when Matthew Warchus had the idea Minchin would be the perfect match for the new musical they were planning at the RSC for 2010. This is where it all started.

And 'When I Grow Up' was the first song he wrote.

The stage is set with four giant swings. You don't need to know this when you listen, but it helps. The opening piano phrase is effortlessly simple, and simply perfect. An F major triad (three notes), like a music box – A, F and of course middle C. This is the centre of the piano and the centre of our known musical world.

Children all around the globe can play this on the piano, quite easily, and they, too, are playing

It's swingtime: Matilda The Musical's West End cast perform 'When I Grow Up'

in the hope that childhood lasts forever – you only need three fingers (the other hand can hold the bag of sweets). Those of us who write music are always aiming for this: something that's new but feels known, something already intrinsically part of our voices, and our hands.

The melody is beautifully innocent, the rising cadence echoing the lyrics: 'When I grow up.' Here's the song in the first four notes – we're captured already, the music pulling our chins up and the words grabbing the hairs up on our necks like the static from rubbing a balloon.

Because the tune is immediately memorable Minchin can afford to pack the song with words and thoughts, as a kid might, coming thick and fast as they imagine what it would be like to be a child in an adult world. No tooth decay, no bedtimes, sunshine every day, eyes not going square (this is, as far as I can tell, a myth – I, like Mr Wormwood, watched a lot of telly).

We have the opening verses, and then the full wonder of Chris Nightingale's orchestration kicks in, snare drum pounding on every crotchet, hammering the point home that what we're listening to is *important*. Of course it is. What's more important than childhood?

Then the lyric that really gets my tear ducts producing their annual rainfall allowance, buried in the belly of the song and surrounded by joyous brass but standing out as the moment when every adult in the audience realises, if they haven't already, that yes, children know, they do see the heavy things: 'I will be strong enough to carry all the heavy things you have to haul around with you when you're a grown-up.'

Beautiful, and it falls over the harmonic crux of the song, which gives it that particular poignancy – the melody on 'strong' is the third note of the F chord (A – very happy and very easy) but here it becomes the major seventh as the chord moves to B flat (also pleasant but the chord changes to B flat minor but with a G in the bass and the A then takes on a completely new feeling, one which grabs our ears and takes them into tear-prodding territory).

This all happens pretty quickly, of course, and me just writing down capital letters might seem arcane, but in a song like this with mostly simple harmony it's a moment that becomes a musical magnet for all the emotional elements of the song.

The lift-off comes after the next verse, and those swings really start to soar as the drums go double time and we're thinking about treats every day and never getting sunburned, and frankly, as the actors soar into the first few rows of the auditorium, if people aren't smiling with big ugly tears streaming down their faces they're not really human.

Matilda is one of the great stage adaptations of a novel. It is also a great adaptation of Dahl's singular imagination, his wisdom and his impact on our lives. The story of a little girl with remarkable powers who is considered unremarkable by her family and desperate to grow up. The book, and the show – and this song – tell her it's OK to take your time. To take growing up seriously.

Now where are those square spectacles? M

"If people listening aren't smiling with big ugly tears, they're not really human"

PHOTOGRAPHY: Manuel Harlan © RSC

Broadway Bulletin

Matt Wolf finds that New York seems to be overflowing with revivals and even a premiere of Sondheim's work as we approach the second anniversary of his death this November

Above Annaleigh Ashford and Josh Groban in the Sweeney Todd revival **Left** Shaw Festival's Gypsy

Is there such a thing as a surfeit of Sondheim? Not these days, it would seem, and the theatre is a more exciting place for it. As we approach the second anniversary of the defining composer-lyricist's death in November, Sondheim and his work seem to be more in our midst than ever, and on every level.

Broadway, for instance, has had two resounding hits with revivals of *Into the Woods* and *Sweeney Todd*. The latter continues to be energised at the Lunt-Fontanne Theatre by the star wattage of Josh Groban, who sings the part beautifully even if he's not as seismically scary as other Sweeneys I have seen; Annaleigh Ashford, in turn, gets her laughs as Mrs Lovett, if rather too often (for my taste) at the expense of diction and clarity.

Nonetheless, its pulling power is unquestionable and looks to be rivalled this autumn by the transfer of last season's cataclysmically moving revival of *Merrily We Roll Along* – a Sondheim flop once thought to be box office anathema only to have resurfaced in glory, and nowhere more notably than in the hands of director Maria Friedman and her New York leading men, Daniel Radcliffe (as Charley) and a career-best Jonathan Groff (as Franklin). If this performance – in the show's trickiest part, no less – doesn't win Groff the Tony denied him years back for *Spring Awakening*, the voters will have some explaining to do.

The thought of three Sondheim hits in quick succession would surely have bemused the man himself, who had an unrivalled sequence of premieres during the 1970s, only one of which – *A Little Night Music* – made any real box office noise. In fact, there are ongoing rumours of that show resurfacing at Lincoln Center Theater; wouldn't Emma Thompson and Judi Dench be perfect casting as Desirée and Madame Armfeldt? Dench is nearing 30 years since her definitive Desirée for the National Theatre, and I can just imagine the heartbreaking 'Liaisons' the Dame surely contains within her.

While we wait to hear whether that title will resurface afresh in New York, Off Broadway is humming along to the premiere of Sondheim's last show, *Here We Are*, whose mid-October opening at The Shed in Hudson Yards will answer those who have long wondered how book writer David Ives and director Joe Mantello have navigated its unfinished state. For years, this title was on the schedule for the Public Theater downtown, the onetime home of Sondheim's *Road Show*, where more than once news emerged that much of the score for *Here We Are* had yet to be written. (Sondheim himself told me as much in the last phone chat we had together.)

That said, Shakespeare is just one artist whose output was added to/amended, so why not Sondheim? In any case, curiosity is such that the 15-week run is easily this season's hottest ticket, with seats going for $350 a pop and a hugely intriguing cast that mixes Tony winners David Hyde Pierce (*Curtains*) and Rachel Bay Jones (*Dear Evan Hansen*) with rising star Micaela Diamond (late of *Parade*) and the indefatigable Tracie Bennett, the two-time Olivier Award winner last seen playing the male boss in *How to Succeed In Business Without Really Trying* Off West End. Can cast member Bobby Cannavale sing? I guess we'll soon find out, and it's worth bearing in mind that Sondheim's *Passion* garnered a 1994 Tony nomination for Tom Aldredge in a non-singing role.

The canonical titles are with us more than ever, and that's without the West End premiere of *Stephen Sondheim's Old Friends* to remind us of his heft and breadth. How amazing is it, by the way, to note in passing the convergence briefly on Shaftesbury Avenue of the original stars of *Sunday in the Park With George* – Bernadette Peters in the Sondheim revue and Mandy Patinkin, whose concert show does eight performances across two weeks this November at the Lyric Theatre.

Pacific Overtures – previously seen in London at the Donmar and before that at ENO – caps a triptych of musical offerings at the Menier Chocolate Factory, the theatre that set the Friedman-directed *Merrily* on its way to the West End and from there to Broadway. Matthew White is the director of a show co-produced with the Umeda Arts Theater of Japan – and one assumes a New York run is in its sights.

Plus *Gypsy* is more popular than ever, recent sightings at Goodspeed Opera House and the Shaw Festival in Niagara-on-the-Lake, in Canada, whetting the appetite for a Broadway return said to be wedded to Audra McDonald, who has performed Sondheim but never for a major extended run; Sondheim's lyrics in this instance tethered of course to Jule Styne's searing music. The Shaw Festival *Gypsy*, which I saw mid-July, starred local favourite Kate Hennig as possibly the most resolutely determined Momma Rose I have ever seen, if by no means the best sung.

If all of this isn't enough, it was startling to notice a new addition of late to the real estate listings in Manhattan's Turtle Bay. I'm referring to the fact that Sondheim's 49th Street brownstone has been advertised for sale for a mere $7 million, which seems on the low side for a self-contained home with a garden that once adjoined Katharine Hepburn's. As soon as word got out, a clamour arose to ringfence this residence as a museum – a repository of all things Sondheim.

Whatever its fate, I can imagine many theatre mavens curious to check the property out first and do the sums later. After all, as Sondheim never quite wrote, finance it tomorrow, buy the house tonight. M

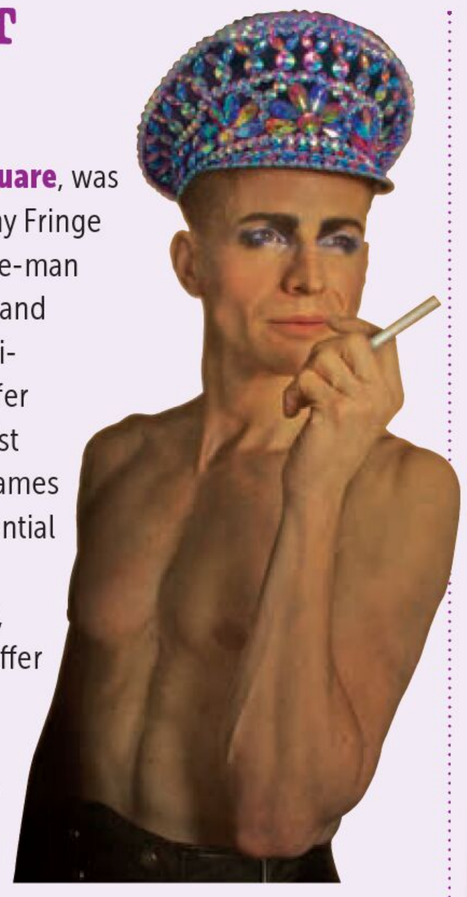
"Sweeney Todd's pulling power looks to be rivalled this autumn by Merrily We Roll Along which has resurfaced in glory"

PHOTOGRAPHY: David Cooper / Matthew Murphy and Evan Zimmerman

Edinburgh Festival 2023

Glasgow-based writer **Mark Brown** reports on a varied selection of musicals at the Fringe – from a one-man show to a children's comedy – plus Weill at the International Festival

3 AUGUST 2023



Fabulett 1933, at the **Underbelly Bristo Square**, was a good place to start my Fringe musicals journey. A one-man queer musical created and performed by the multi-talented Michael Trauffer (accompanied by pianist and musical director James Hall), it is the quintessential Fringe show.

Performing in a tiny, sweltering venue, Trauffer plays the part of Felix, the emcee of 1930s Berlin cabaret club the Fabulett. He evokes the atmosphere of the venue on its last night before closure by the Nazis.

Strong storytelling combines with songs from the Weimar era and compositions by Trauffer himself. A bold and brave piece of solo performance, *Fabulett 1933* is a chilling account of the homophobia and transphobia of the Nazi regime.

8 AUGUST 2023

At the famous **Traverse Theatre**, another show dealing with homophobia, **After the Act (A Section 28 Musical)**, takes on the history and legacy of Margaret Thatcher's anti-gay legislation (which was consigned to the legislative dustbin in Scotland in 2000, and in England and Wales in 2003). Presented by Breach Theatre, the piece is that rarest of things: a work of verbatim Musical Theatre.

The words of LGBTQ+ people who were still at school when the law (which forbade the supposed 'promotion' of homosexuality) came into effect are sung to a 1980s-style electro-pop musical score. So, too, are the astonishingly prejudiced comments of homophobic parliamentarians.

Well choreographed and energetically performed, this is a memorable, highly original show.

13 AUGUST 2023

It would be hard to forget **Andronicus Synecdoche**, the latest work by acclaimed Polish theatre company Song of the Goat. Playing at the **ZOO Southside** venue, director Grzegorz Bral's troupe presented a version of Shakespeare's most violent play, *Titus Andronicus*, by means of their famous combination of polyphonic song, traditional music and highly stylised movement.

In truth, the piece is more effective in song than in the moments when the cast are required to speak dialogue in English. Its depiction of the rape and mutilation of Lavinia, in particular, is a powerfully direct cry against war crimes targeting women.

Ultimately, this work is a little uneven aesthetically. However, as one expects of Bral's company, it still manages to move and impress.

18 AUGUST 2023

Musical Theatre lovers were in a state of justified excitement ahead of the Edinburgh International Festival performances of the classic Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill work **The Threepenny Opera**. Playing at the glorious **Festival Theatre**, the great 'play with songs' was staged for Brecht's own company, the Berliner Ensemble, by the acclaimed Australian director Barrie Kosky.

Weill is (with apologies to Stephen Sondheim) arguably the greatest composer in the history of modern Musical Theatre. This telling of Brecht's allegorical tale of organised crime in Victorian London brings forth fabulous renditions of such famous numbers as 'Mack the Knife' and 'Pirate Jenny'.

Performed on a stark, deceptively versatile set, it boasts a universally excellent cast, including Gabriel Schneider as the dangerous crime baron Macheath.

20 AUGUST 2023

There's a considerable switch in tone between the Brecht/Weill piece and the cheerier children's show **Roger McGough's Money-Go-Round**. Presented by Jam Jar Theatrical Productions at the **Assembly Rooms**, this piece by the famous Liverpool poet is inspired by Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows*.

The show tells the story of a single gold coin which, thanks to the good consciences of the various anthropomorphised animals, is passed from one character to another.

The lovely 'Song of the River' stands out among composer Steve Halliwell's gentle musical numbers. Some clever jokes by McGough add little sparks to a nicely presented, excellently performed and unashamedly traditional children's musical.

22 AUGUST 2023

How better to end than with the buzzy musical **Kathy and Stella Solve a Murder**? By the final week of the Fringe, this crowd-pleasing show was playing to sold-out audiences in the large hall at **Underbelly George Square**, ahead of autumn tour dates at the Bristol Old Vic and Home, Manchester.

The bold-as-brass double act of Bronté Barbé (Kathy) and Rebekah Hinds (Stella) lead a fine cast in this upbeat telling of the story of the titular true crime podcasters-turned-amateur sleuths. This musical by Jon Brittain (book and lyrics) and Matthew Floyd Jones (music and lyrics) borrows from across the pop music spectrum.

Humorous and bristling with popular culture references, it is a nailed-on hit.

The Edinburgh Festival Fringe and the Edinburgh International Festival return next August – visit edfringe.com; eif.co.uk

PHOTOGRAPHY: Georgina Bolton King / Alex Brenner / Domas Rimeika / Jess Shurte / Michael Elizabeth / Mihaela Bodlovic

Keeping Score A Little Night Music

Operetta is far more than brainless fluff, argues the composer and arranger **Jason Carr**, who gives us an inside look at Sondheim's score for the award-winning 1973 show

Operetta. 'Don't use the "O" word,' they tell you, 'it's not sexy!' Well, perhaps that's true of Gilbert and Sullivan, but as anyone who's seen a good production of *Die Fledermaus* or *La Belle Hélène* knows, that's just not so. Operetta is not merely brainless fluff, but a sophisticated genre in which glamorous people pursue their sexual adventures, accompanied by a musical score that's grander than the average musical comedy.

And Broadway supremo Hal Prince, fresh from his successes with *Cabaret* and *Company*, decided to make a new one, based on Jean Anouilh's play *Ring Round the Moon*. When the rights were unavailable, he turned to Swedish film director Ingmar Bergman's *Smiles of a Summer Night* instead, which similarly features a grande dame in a wheelchair serving up *bons mots* while assorted amorous couples whirl around her.

This is, of course, the third of the six musicals Prince created with composer-lyricist Stephen Sondheim between 1970 and 1981. Where some of their other shows were perhaps more a *succès d'estime* than a bona fide hit, *A Little Night Music* was both an artistic and commercial success, winning the 1973 Tony Awards for Best Musical and Best Original Score, and paying off its investors. Perhaps this is because, unlike their previous offering *Follies*, the central middle-aged couple actually work through their problems to reunite in a passionate embrace, while the orchestra reprises 'Send in the Clowns' ecstatically.

Famously, this is the score written 'entirely in waltz-time'. Well, there certainly are plenty of waltzes ('Soon', 'Remember?', the 'Night Waltz' that frames the show), and also plenty of other triple-time metres (a polonaise for 'In Praise of Women', a sarabande for 'Liaisons', a mazurka for the verse of 'The Glamorous Life'), but much of the score is in compound time ('A Weekend in the Country' marches along in 6/8), and 'The Miller's Son' includes sections in 2/4 ('It's a wink and a wiggle and a giggle on the grass'). But let's not get mired in pedantry.

Above Judi Dench's 'Clowns' **Below** Opera North's A Little Night Music

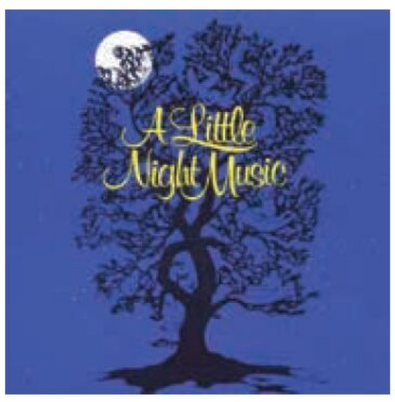
More astonishing to us today is that the show went into rehearsal with neither 'A Weekend in the Country' nor 'Send in the Clowns'. Musicals are a collaborative process, and perhaps Sondheim might never have written 'Weekend' without seeing Boris Aronson's set of gliding birch trees, or 'Clowns' without having witnessed actress Glynis Johns in rehearsal. Indeed, one might expect the leading man, lawyer Fredrik Egerman, to have the song in this scene, as he is arguably the protagonist who has to learn he belongs with his old flame, actress Desirée Armfeldt, rather than Anne, his virginal young bride.

Without 'Clowns', Desirée would have almost nothing to sing, and often this part is taken by actors not known for their vocal chops (Judi Dench, Elizabeth Taylor), but the song absolutely turns Desirée into the star part. She, with her mother Madame Armfeldt (Hermione Gingold, Angela Lansbury) and her rival the Countess (Diana Rigg, Patricia Hodge), have the lion's share of the epigrammatic witticisms which bejewel the script, leaving the men to do their best with the 'feed' lines.

A key collaborator on all six Prince/Sondheim shows during this era was orchestrator Jonathan Tunick. The original 25-piece orchestra is unapologetically classical, the most unusual element being the three French horns (essential for 'In Praise of Women', based, as it is, on three-note chords – though I didn't use any in my rethought chamber version for Trevor Nunn). And I ought to mention the 'Liebeslieders', an ensemble of five singers who sing the unusual vocal Overture and stage-manage the action.

Prince would go on to explore operetta again – hysterically in *On the Twentieth Century* (1978) and, more straight-faced, in *The Phantom of the Opera* (1986). Sondheim is well-known for 'never doing anything twice', although *Into the Woods* has many operetta elements. Meanwhile, relish my favourite Sondheim song, 'Every Day a Little Death', which epitomises the bittersweet flavour of this show and, indeed, the genre. M

Jason Carr's listening recommendation



A Little Night Music
Original Broadway Cast Recording
Len Cariou, Glynis Johns, Hermione Gingold *et al*
Sony BMG

There are at least seven major recordings, all with things to recommend them. It's fun to track actors through different versions – you can hear Sîan Phillips as both Desirée and Madame Armfeldt, and Laurence Guittard as both the Count and Fredrick. You can hear Victoria Mallory as Anne in the Original Broadway Cast, and her daughter Ramona in the same role in the Broadway revival. But, finally, the OBC gives us a cast without a weak link, and, in Glynis Johns, the reason we have 'Send in the Clowns'.

PHOTOGRAPHY: Danny Kaan / Tristram Kenton

New Musicals Spotlight

Otto Weidt's Brush and Broom Workshop for the Blind

Theatre songwriter **Tim Connor** explores a heroic work by Amir Shoenfeld and Caitlyn Burt

Nazi Berlin. Not exactly new territory in Musical Theatre (*Cabaret*, anyone?). But what about the thousands of untold stories that have never come to light? One such tale inspired writing team Caitlyn Burt (book and lyrics) and Amir Shoenfeld (music and lyrics) to tackle their latest project, *Otto Weidt's Brush and Broom Workshop for the Blind*.

'I lived in New York for six or seven months,' Shoenfeld explains. 'I was staying in SoHo and seeing people with visual impairments walk around quite a lot. It made me think of their experience of the city. Having mobility issues, I found New York very inaccessible.

'Caitlyn and I started talking about it. And being Musical Theatre geeks, we questioned why there weren't more musicals revolving around the visually impaired community. Because Musical Theatre is such an aural medium; you convey so much through music and sound already.'

Surely, they felt, there could be a way to really support and embrace the visually impaired community – both through characters portrayed onstage and in the way a piece is delivered. So they started looking around for the right story.

It was Burt who read about Otto Weidt, a blind German who managed a factory employing blind Jews in 1940s Berlin. He used his own disability and people's perceptions of him as a lower-status 'lesser German' to shield Jewish Berliners from the Nazis, setting up a series of safe houses. He even made a journey to Auschwitz to rescue one of his workers.

Above Jake Sawyers, Caitlyn Burt, Natalia Blomberg, Aarian Mehrbani and Gillian Dean at BEAM **Right** Sawyers

'We were like "Why have we never heard about this?!",' Burt says. 'It's such a heroic tale that immediately sings. There's so much heart to it. And such selflessness.' As the two delved into their research, they discovered very few people knew much about this story – even within the visually impaired community. But a researcher at the Otto Weidt Museum in Berlin has been invaluable in shaping their adaptation.

From the get-go, Shoenfeld and Burt wanted to incorporate audio-described elements within the piece. It would be written in a way that was particularly accessible for people with visual impairments. They've valued working alongside creatives and actors with that lived experience and taking on board their feedback.

Musically, they had lots of discussions before Shoenfeld started on the score. 'We could go fully pastiche with music of the time or completely juxtapose it with a more modern genre,' adds Shoenfeld. 'But even that has implications. Setting Jesus and the apostles as 1970s hippies in *Jesus Christ Superstar* is saying something! It has meaning.

'So I've gone for the sound of 1930s Berlin operetta – taking that as a noticeable influence on the score, while not being the heart of it. And leaning into the more contemporary, romantic harmonies when we want to give a window into people's souls.' That mix is something shows like *Parade* and *Ragtime* do so well: it's clear there's a strong period influence, but they're by no means period pieces.

Otto Weidt is at an exciting mid-point in its development, with a finished first act (recently presented in extract form at BEAM), and a research and development week coming up at Leeds Playhouse to work through Act Two.

As former recipients of the Cameron Mackintosh Writing Team Residency, Burt and Shoenfeld have found the support of Theatre Clywd and The Mackintosh Foundation has been truly game-changing. And they're hopeful an exciting commercial life awaits the piece.

'It feels like it has that potential,' comments Burt. 'It's such an extraordinary untold story. And it's our hope to present the experiences of people with visual impairments, and the concept of integrated audio description, to a wider audience. It's exciting new territory to be exploring.'

Bravo to a piece – and a writing team – setting out to really challenge people's preconceived ideas of what visual impairment is. And what better art form to bring about that change? M

To find out more about Otto Weidt's Brush and Broom Workshop for the Blind, visit shoenfeldandburt.com

> **Bravo to a piece setting out to really challenge people's preconceived ideas of what visual impairment is**

PHOTOGRAPHY: David Ovenden

Rising Star

Nathania Ong

The talented performer has played Éponine in both the touring and West End productions of Les Misérables

The facts Nathania Ong is a 25-year-old Singaporean actress who already has two West End shows under her belt. She relates hugely to her character Éponine in *Les Mis*: 'Even if it's not unrequited love, everyone has things they want desperately to achieve.' It hasn't been easy, but Ong made her dream a reality. Her final West End *Les Mis* was on 23 September, but we'll undoubtedly be seeing a lot more of her – mark our words!

Beginnings 'Music was always a big part of my family,' she recalls of her Singapore upbringing. Her dentist dad, once a semi-professional singer, taught all his daughters. After Ong aced a talent competition, aged 10, that training grew more serious. 'My dad said: "If you want to sing, you have to do it well."'

Lacking resources Ong did a theatre A-level, but wasn't sure a career was feasible. 'The arts aren't as supported locally in Singapore,' she explains. 'Most audiences only go to see international companies perform.' So, she applied for five drama schools in the UK – 'not realising that, to get in, you had to be able to act!'

A second chance After being rejected by those schools, Ong rallied and began studying at Singapore's Lasalle College of the Arts instead. 'Then audition season rolled round again. My best friend convinced me to go for Mountview – she said: "You've wanted this for such a long time, you'll regret not trying."' Ong's flight landed in

the UK just two hours before her audition. 'I messed it up, but somehow I got in!'

Training While at Mountview, Covid struck – yet, in a strange way, it helped Ong. 'I was doing badly in class because I was so nervous to sing in front of my teachers and peers. But watching my online classes back made me realise that if I hit a bum note, it's not a big deal.' Aged just 20 when she moved countries, Ong learnt to 'handle different situations'.

Cool casting Ong made her professional debut in musical *Be More Chill*, joining its West End transfer from The Other Palace. 'I was fortunate to have a lovely cast who helped me; I had no idea what I was doing half the time.' Since there were few cast changes, it was a short rehearsal period: after just three weeks, Ong was onstage. However, she says she was inspired by the show's message: 'You don't need to fit in – just be yourself, be uniquely you.'

Revolutionary Ong auditioned for Éponine in the West End – and, ultimately, didn't get it. But she was then invited to try for the national tour. 'I fully embarrassed myself in front of Cameron Mackintosh. He asked if I'd seen *Les Mis* and I said no! I guess it worked out – Éponine is supposed to be tactless and brash.' Victor Hugo's novel then deepened her characterisation. 'Éponine has a strength to her: she fights to protect Marius. She's only known hardship and abuse, so his kindness is this ray of light.'

London calling Ong loved getting to know the UK through touring. 'In Glasgow, they'd been waiting three years because of Covid, and on press night, it sounded like extra percussion during the finale because the audience were stamping their feet! [Composer] Claude-Michel Schönberg was really moved.' It was a difficult choice to leave the tour partway through, when she was then offered Éponine in the West End, but she grew to love the relative intimacy of the Sondheim Theatre. 'Because this musical is really honest, there are moments when you want to catch the actor's eye.'

Home time Ong's family did get to see her in *Les Mis*, despite Covid. Her mum surprised her in Glasgow, first quarantining in secret. 'I wept!' she recalls. Everyone back home could also watch her in the BBC's *Big Night of Musicals*. But now, they'll get to see her perform live: she's playing Cinderella in Sondheim's *Into the Woods* in Singapore in October. After that, she aims to work more in the UK – but also hopes that Singapore's own theatre scene will develop. 'I know this industry is tough, at every stage,' she says. 'But if you keep moving yourself forward, amazing things can happen.'

Les Misérables at the Sondheim Theatre is currently booking until 2 March 2024 – for more information and to book tickets, visit lesmis.com

Welsh epic is reborn

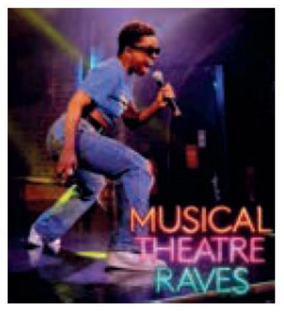
The Wales Millennium Centre and Frân Wen are joining forces to present a new Welsh-language musical. *Branwen: Dadeni*, with a book by Hanna Jarman, Elgan Rhys and Seiriol Davies (who also wrote the music and lyrics), premieres in November 2023. It's helmed by Frân Wen's artistic director, Gethin Evans, and features a creative team from across Wales.

The production puts a contemporary slant on the well-known tale of Branwen, a young princess determined to bring change to a corrupt monarchy. Evans said: 'Finding the humanity in these myth-like figures to unlock themes of power, grief and family is a real privilege.'

***Branwen: Dadeni* opens at the Wales Millennium Centre's Donald Gordon Theatre on 8 November, followed by shows at Aberystwyth Arts Centre (15-17 November) and concluding at Pontio Arts Centre, Bangor (22-25 November).**

To book tickets for the show and for more information, visit franwen.com/en/productions/branwen

Musical Theatre Raves launches Junior event



Following a successful series of Musical Theatre Raves at London nightclub Heaven, a new Junior event is set to launch. With cameo appearances by West End stars, alongside Musical Theatre-themed DJ sets and lip-sync battles, the Raves have been taking London by storm since 2022, and have started touring the UK too. But now it's time for 13-17 year olds to get in on the action! The first event will run on 2 March 2024 at community venue Peckham Levels, giving, says founder and events marketer Willy, 'a chance for juniors to belt out classics and make like-minded friends'.

Buy tickets via Eventbrite; for more information, visit musicaltheatreraves.wordpress.com

UK tours: exciting new casts

Numerous musicals are going out on the road this year – and all feature exciting touring casts. *Madagascar the Musical* is led by Karim Zeroual, Francisco Gomes, Joseph Hewlett, Joshua Oakes-Rogers and Jarnéia Richard-Noel, while *Wicked* defies gravity with Laura Pick, Sarah O'Connor, Carl Man, Donna Berlin, Simeon Truby and Jed Berry.

***Everybody's Talking About Jamie* boasts the amazing Ivano Turco, Rebecca McKinnis, Shobna Gulati and Talia Palamathanan alongside, at various points in the tour, Darren Day, Kevin Clifton, John Partridge, Giovanna Fletcher and Hayley Tamaddon. Aphiwe Nyezi, Brian Gilligan and Andre Jewson have joined *The Lion King*, while Lucie-Mae Sumner and Billy Roberts head up *I Should Be So Lucky*. *The Bodyguard* features Emily Williams, Ayden Callaghan and Emily-Mae, and *Aladdin* has the genie-us combo of Yeukayi Ushe, Gavin Adams, Desmonda Cathabel and Adam Strong.**

Read more about life on the road in our feature on page 30

PHOTOGRAPHY: Johan Persson / Leo Neumann

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Leaning into her WILD SIDE

From a music-filled childhood in Belfast to a string of trailblazing roles in the West End and on Broadway, **Rachel Tucker** has always made storytelling her focus. **Edward Seckerson** catches up with her as she records her new rock-infused solo album and prepares to tread the boards as Norma Desmond in Sunset Boulevard

PHOTOGRAPHY: Pawel Spolnicki

We rendezvous at London's Umbrella Rooms where Rachel Tucker is setting down her new album for Westway Records. 'He's My Boy' (from *Everybody's Talking About Jamie*) is one of the tracks on the schedule for this session and with the instrumentals already in the can she is raring to go with those rangy vocals.

I've always thought that Tucker's resilient sound embodied the spirit of her Northern Irish roots, born and bred not just at home but, as we'll learn, in the pubs and clubs of Belfast – and if ever a speaking voice gave notice of the colour and cast and twang of the singer we know and love from shows like *Wicked*, *Come From Away* and Sting's *The Last Ship*, then this is it.

Tucker greets me like an old friend in that wonderfully engaging and welcoming way that the Irish have, and no sooner have we found a corner in which to sit and chat than she's interviewing me. She's been well briefed, too, and for a few minutes it seems almost churlish to point out that this is probably not the time or place for role reversal.

Curating an album is an art in itself – very personal, very exacting – and Tucker didn't want it to reflect only one aspect of her musical make-up. That was quickly established early on. This Musical Theatre star was keen to cross boundaries and show as many facets of her vocal personality as possible.

'OK, so I'm a Musical Theatre artist, that's what I'm known for and it's what I love with a passion. But – and don't shoot me down for saying this – I don't sit and listen to Musical Theatre albums. I never have done. I need the context of the show. I need to be in an audience. Then I'm in heaven. So I was very adamant that this wasn't going to be, quote unquote, a purely Musical Theatre album.'

The label was more than happy – and perhaps even a little relieved – with that decision. She speaks highly of the energy that Neil O'Brien and Rhydian Roberts, the Westway power duo, bring to the table.

The three of them first sat down more than a year ago (that's how long these things take) and once the musical director and producer Adam Dennis and co-producer and mix engineer Tim Hamill were on board, they started talking specifics. She was living in New York at the time – Tucker is one of our truly transatlantic stars – so most of the subsequent communication was by email and Zoom.

> **My sister was playing Dorothy. I saw those ruby shoes and I was like, I need a pair of those and I need them now**

Around a hundred songs eventually became 13. And along with the nods to *Jamie* and *Waitress* and *The Bridges of Madison County* (which brings us a duet with the composer Jason Robert Brown in one of the great songs from that score – 'It All Fades Away'), there is crossover spice ranging from Brandi Carlile and singer-songwriter Caroline Kay from Dublin to The Waterboys and The Rolling Stones. There's also a duet, with *Moulin Rouge!*'s Jamie Muscato, of 'Happier Than Ever' by Billie Eilish.

'I've got a bit of an edgy, rocky voice, you know,' she says, alluding to a vocal quality of hers that we've all long recognised and admired. 'I love Queen, I love The Beatles. I love the Stones. I wanted to bring a bit of that, you know, taste and flavour to the album. I love acting through song. I'm known for telling a story. But I wanted to bring that to a song like [Gene Pitney's, later Cyndi Lauper's] "I'm Gonna Be Strong"…'

And how. Tucker's innate musicality clearly comes from her dad, who's a massive Beatles fan and who was in bands pretty much the whole time she was growing up. I digress briefly to tell of my own father/son bonding on the day 'Sgt Pepper' was released and the interview almost grinds to a halt when I reveal my professional encounters with Paul McCartney which even now seem quite surreal. Tucker's dad could impersonate anyone and switch instruments at will.

'So we had instruments all around the house,' she recalls. 'I would harmonise with him through pretty much the whole Beatles catalogue… and then I heard Tina Turner – I think it was *Live Aid* – and it stopped me in my tracks. I saw this woman, this force of nature, storm across the stage… and that voice! And that's when dad, you know, thought: "Let's add a bit of Tina to the act." I was nine years old.'

You can absolutely see why Turner would have turned Tucker's head. A nine-year-old born into the Belfast of The Troubles would have been fortified by her resolve and inspired by the power of music to heal and to overcome. There's a lot of defiance in Tucker's voice.

'I did a couple of songs at my Aunt Emma's 60th surprise birthday party and that was it, that's when the cabaret began. Then I was always rehearsing and singing, and I had my dad's audience to encourage me on my way.' There were wider influences, too: 'Bette Midler, not just for the acting through song but for the comedy. And there was Barbra Streisand, of course, and, getting a bit older, the incredible high belt of Celine Dion. All of them helped me find my own voice.' But when it came to getting into theatre, it was her family who were, once again, a key inspiration. 'My sister was playing Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*,' she remembers. 'I saw those ruby shoes and I was like, I need a pair of those and I need them now.'

So there was live cabaret and there was theatre. Tucker clearly saw them as flip sides

PHOTOGRAPHY: Joan Marcus / Matt Murphy

Left Truly international, Tucker has performed in the West End and on Broadway, as Elphaba in Wicked... **Above** ...and as Beverley Bass in Come From Away

of the same coin, the former raw and spontaneous – her dad's world – and the latter a more refined and sophisticated art form for a more demanding audience. Her voice may have been Belfast born and bred, but it was refined and polished at the Royal Academy of Music by that doyenne of singing coaches Mary Hammond. She channelled Tucker's energy and honed her vocal equipment in readiness for the rigorous 'eight-shows-a-week' regime.

The quote at the head of Tucker's website is from her mum to her then 15-year-old daughter: 'Would you be happy in the back row of the chorus for the rest of your life?' The reply? 'Yes, absolutely!' But the confidence of that reply belies a determination to be downstage centre where she belonged. Or on a broomstick looking to the western sky… 'Everyone deserves the chance to fly!' And, boy, did she.

"I heard Tina Turner – I think it was Live Aid – and it stopped me in my tracks. I saw this woman, this force of nature, storm across the stage... and that voice!"

If ever there was an Elphaba voice for the asking, then Tucker's was it. She replaced Alexia Khadime in the West End production of *Wicked* in 2010, later graduating to Broadway and clocking up well over 1,000 performances.

Actually, she first auditioned for Glinda. Excuse me? A casting director friend of hers had earlier secured Tucker's first professional job as Maureen in *Rent* in Dublin, and given that she was blonde at the time with a nose for comedy it followed that she'd be ripe for Glinda, didn't it? Not without a soprano top, it wouldn't. But Tucker was green with envy for only one role and after three tries the producers saw sense. She sang Roxette's 'It Must Have Been Love' for her first audition. Audacious.

Every Elphaba will tell you that sustaining what is without a shadow of a doubt the most vocally challenging role in contemporary Musical Theatre is as much the name of the game as singing it. Tucker speaks candidly about the discovery that where she was in her menstrual cycle was key to how she needed to pace herself vocally. That, and learning how to consume a litre and a half of water during every show.

'Hydration was massive. Or I was in big trouble. Nor could I sing, as I was inclined to do, when I was not 100% fit and well. You want to be there every night but putting added stress on the chords and risking them getting swollen when you are under the weather with a cold or whatever is not the way to do it. I would think, "Oh, I'll be fine," but you'd know right at the top of the show that you wouldn't. "The Wizard and I" sits right on my break. Tricky. But I learned how to navigate that and I learned how to use it as a kind of warm-up. Ha! The *Wicked* company are gonna die hearing me say this, but you learn how to pace not just the show but the whole week of shows.'

Life after *Wicked* brought two productions whose traditional folk music-infused scores proved an extraordinary fit for her: Sting's *The Last Ship* and Irene Sankoff and David Hein's *Come From Away*. Both of us have first-hand experience of Sting's charm and erudition, my own through a podcast we made together for the release of his album 'Symphonicities'. But neither Tucker nor I can quite put a finger on why *The Last Ship* opened on Broadway (in 2014) and not in the UK – or perhaps even more specifically in the North-East whose whole ethos his beautiful score exudes (it was, in fact, revived for a short run in Newcastle in 2018, but with a new cast). Tucker thinks it was probably

Left John & Jen at Southwark Playhouse, with Lewis Cornay
Above Making waves in Sting's The Last Ship on Broadway

logistical in terms of timing and the availability of the creative team, but also acknowledges that it gave her the backstage experience of a lifetime.

'One night I had Tom Hanks, Meryl Streep and Billy Joel knocking on my dressing room door. Jeez. I genuinely couldn't get my head around it. I thought someone's going to tap me on the shoulder any moment and say: "I'm sorry, we've made an awful mistake." I honestly don't believe where I am in the business until I'm reminded. I still have this inferiority complex that makes me think they're talking about someone else!'

Sting most definitely wasn't thinking of someone else when he invited her to gig with him one night at New York's 54 Below. Nor Jason Robert Brown, when he fell in love with her talent after seeing her in *The Last Ship*. I remember him introducing her at a big-deal London Palladium/Radio 2 concert and recalling how she had blown him away in that Sting show. Tucker remembers it, too. She wanted to sing 'Stars and the Moon' from *Songs for a New World* at that concert and Brown said: 'Fine, but only if you do it in your own accent!' He loved the music of her Northern Irish brogue.

I ask if she knows his standalone song 'Someone to Fall Back On' and she audibly salivates. Perhaps she'll get to do *The Bridges of Madison County* now that she's showcasing its 11 o'clock number with the composer himself on her new recording. I would pay good money to hear her do 'To Build a Home' from the same show.

So what's cooking for the immediate future? First up, of course, there's the small matter of Jamie Lloyd's production of Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Sunset Boulevard*

PHOTOGRAPHY: Matthew Murphy / Danny Kaan

> **I'm a Musical Theatre artist, but I don't sit and listen to Musical Theatre albums. I never have done. I need the context of the show... So I was adamant this wasn't going to be a purely Musical Theatre album**

at the Savoy Theatre. I wasn't going to mention the Lloyd Webber/Cameron Mackintosh reality TV show *I'd Do Anything*, which first brought Tucker to the nation's attention in 2008. But it's worth recalling the results show in week six where Tucker was in the bottom two and sang 'As If We Never Said Goodbye' from *Sunset* with such show-stopping resolve that the Lord chose to save her. He didn't do so three weeks later, but he did ask her to do the private workshop of *Love Never Dies* in the chapel of his Sydmonton Court home. Weirdly she was cast as Meg Giry, Madame Giry's ballerina daughter, which still makes Tucker smile.

So maybe she wasn't destined to be Nancy just yet, but she was most definitely on Lloyd Webber and Mackintosh's radar. And now here we are, 15 years later, coming what feels like full circle. Tucker is guest-starring as Norma Desmond, sharing the role with Nicole Scherzinger, with performances on 12 October (the matinee) and every Monday from 16 October 2023 until 6 January 2024.

'I've wanted to work with Jamie for a long time,' she said after the news was announced. 'To collaborate with him on a brand-new version of one of Andrew Lloyd Webber's best scores, whilst getting to play such an iconic role, is a career high for me.'

She's also, she tells me, loving TV filming at the moment. 'I'm doing *Hope Street*, season three, which is a Northern Irish drama. It's BBC, it's a daytime soft soap, and it's very quaint and lovely. Then, of course, I've got the album launch to look forward to.'

But theatre remains an important focus for Tucker. Soon after our interview, she was scheduled to perform at a tribute concert celebrating Stephen Schwartz's 75th birthday. Who knows, a new Schwartz musical or even a classy revival might be on the cards at some point. Then there's Claude-Michel Schönberg, who will have been wowed by her rendition of 'Woman' in a 2020 concert of his ill-fated *The Pirate Queen*.

Tucker is very much in favour of these 'concert' revivals of shows which might otherwise be unlikely to see the light of day in big-budget stagings. Nor can you really 'reimagine' a show like Irving Berlin's *Annie Get Your Gun*, for which she recently donned cowboy boots and chaps at the London Palladium; the aforementioned 'twang' in her voice found a natural home in that much-loved score.

There is new and newer work, too, and her appearance in an updated staging of Andrew Lippa and Tom Greenwald's 1995 musical *John & Jen* with the precociously talented Lewis Cornay in 2021 was an unexpected pleasure. Her husband Guy Retallack directed at the super-intimate Southwark Playhouse – which is a further indication (if needed) that Tucker is in this business for the work and the work alone.

In the immediate future, just after she begins her 16-week run in *Sunset Boulevard*, Tucker will be live at the Cadogan Hall, where her own special brand of vocal fireworks will be assured. The concert will mark the official launch of the new album, so it's an unmissable opportunity for us to hear those carefully curated tracks, live. For now, though, she has a few more questions for me… M

Rachel Tucker's new album on Westway Music is released at the beginning of November – visit westwaymusic.com; the album launch concert at Cadogan Hall is on 5 November – visit cadoganhall.com; for tickets to Sunset Boulevard, visit sunsetboulevardwestend.com

Below 'Doin' What Comes Natur'lly' in Annie Get Your Gun at the London Palladium
Right Tucker is back in concert in November with an album launch at Cadogan Hall

We like to move it!

PHOTOGRAPHY: Ella Mae Willoughby / Mark Dawson Photography

The UK is awash with touring musicals this autumn, from Madagascar which opens in October, to a reworked version of Calendar Girls. **Tim Bano** speaks to producers, creatives and performers to find out the logistics of getting a production on the road

Musicals, according to Tim Firth, 'are one of the more complex things that mankind has ever embarked on'. He should know – he's the creator of several, including, with Gary Barlow and Take That, *Calendar Girls* and *Greatest Days* respectively. Despite that complexity, almost two dozen musicals are setting off on UK tours this autumn, from colossal productions like Disney's *Aladdin* to smaller-scale affairs like *The Good Enough Mums Club*. Some, like *Pretty Woman*, are coming hot off a West End run, giving regional UK audiences their first chance to see a show that's been lighting up London. Others, like *I Should Be So Lucky*, are brand new. All of them are heading to each corner of the country, taking their sets, props, wigs, lights, mics – and casts – with them.

What does it take to put a production on the road, so that we can turn up with a ticket in one hand and a glass of wine in the other and simply enjoy the show? A lot, as it turns out. For the reworked version of *Calendar Girls*, currently touring the UK, Firth decided to set it inside the village hall looking out, rather than in Yorkshire looking in. 'The most important thing is to sit and listen to what the show actually needs,' he says. 'That doesn't mean it'll be small in scale, and it absolutely doesn't mean that it won't be massive in emotional impact, but it will mean that you don't throw money in the direction where it's not going to be well spent.' But having a clear vision is only the start: 'When I sit down with the producers and hear about the sheer logistics of getting a show around the country, I think, "This is just crazy, why are we bothering?" You have to run so fast to stand still.'

It can be crazy for the performers, too. Maureen Nolan, who is playing Ruth in the *Calendar Girls* tour, admits that being on the road can be exhausting – 'but I do love it. It's great to see some of Britain – often a lot of Britain! Every audience is different, which is fantastic. I love the West End, but there is something special about touring: there's a buzz around every town we visit, and audiences are so appreciative.'

While the performers can look forward to visiting beautiful cities (among Nolan's favourites are Cambridge, Cheltenham, Oxford, Llandudno and Edinburgh), producers are probably more focused on the practicalities. Take *I Should Be So Lucky*, a new musical written by *Nativity!* creator Debbie Isitt and featuring the hits of Stock, Aitken and Waterman. Richard Darbourne of ATG Productions is the show's producer, and when we talk he is just about to meet with his production team to sign off the designs before sending them away to be built.

'The challenge is creating the spectacular within the practical,' he explains. 'We've got a tour of *Come From Away* coming, but it's so exciting to create something from the ground up with a UK creative team, built for UK audiences, that is of scale.'

However, he explains that touring has only become harder in recent years. 'Post-Covid we're dealing with a huge increase in travel and accommodation costs, including fuel on the trucks. The costs of touring have gone up by about 20%.'

Above Charlie and the Chocolate Factory get-in, Hull; production manager Jack Greenyer
Left Amber Davies, Pretty Woman **Previous page** Drifters Girl get-in, Mayflower; Madagascar

Despite that brutal increase, it was a conscious decision to launch *I Should Be So Lucky* as a tour rather than in the West End. 'You can be in charge of your own destiny in terms of start time. There's so little space in the West End that if and when it does happen, you might have to move very quickly. You might only know within a matter of two or three months, whereas for a tour we could make plans back in 2021 that we were going to aim for Manchester in 2023.'

Musicals take years to develop, Darbourne adds, 'and when that development process has finished you need at least a 12-month pre-production period, which is when you get your design team and you start going through the practicalities of actually delivering the physical work. The benefit of beginning on the road is that you can plan that process better than in the West End where you have to wait for a theatre to become available.'

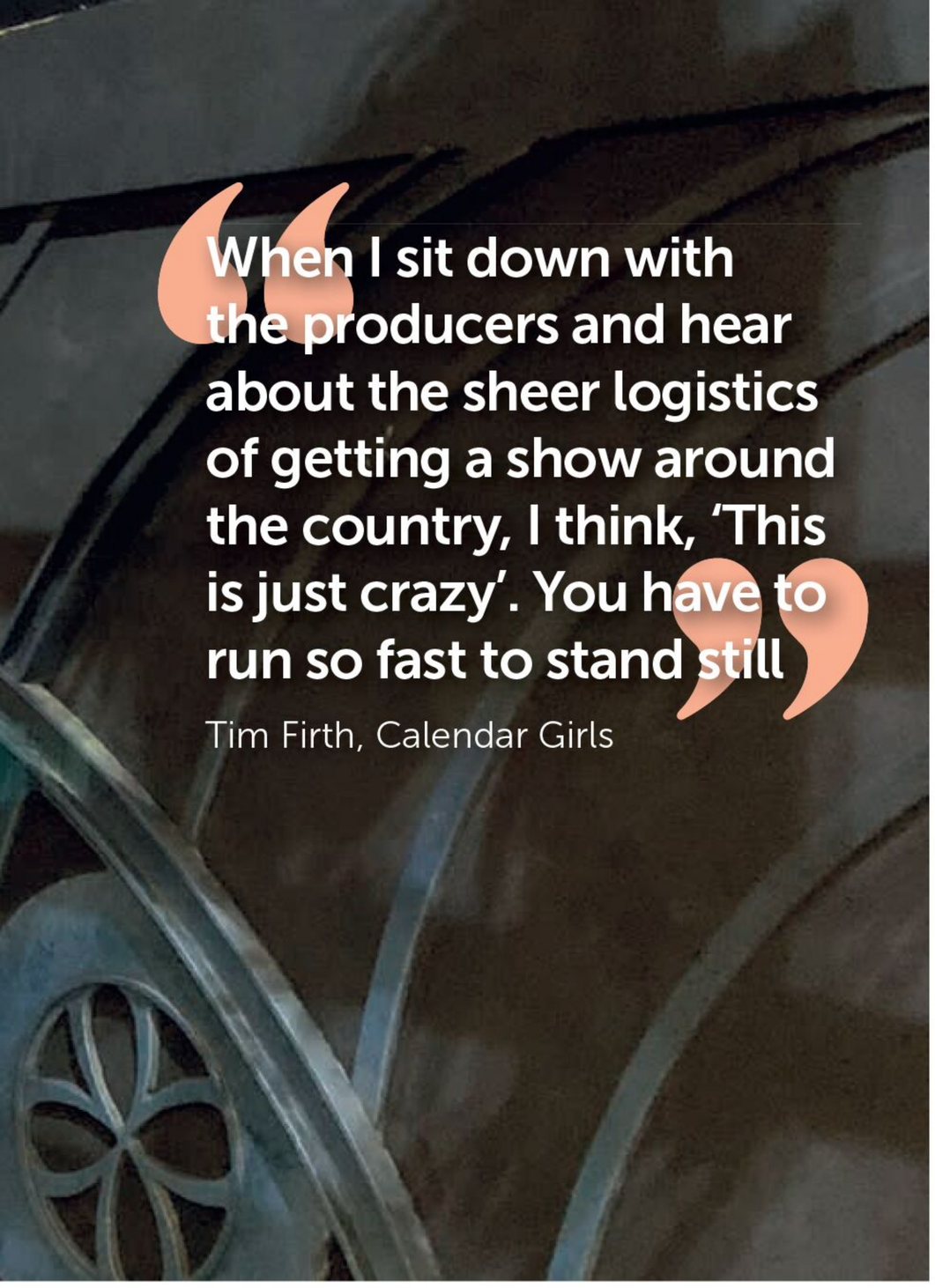
Those practicalities include building the set and costumes, sourcing sound and lighting equipment, booking dates in theatres that aren't too far apart from each other, finding digs for actors to stay in and – crucially – working out how many trucks the whole musical can fit into.

'It's always about the number of trucks,' says Dominic Shaw, who is directing the touring production of *Pretty Woman*, recreating the original direction of Jerry Mitchell, whose work he has overseen in the UK for the past 15 years. 'There's a big financial difference between six trucks and five trucks. I don't think we should shy away from the conversation that one aim is to get as much financial revenue from the show as possible. Obviously, we want everyone to see it, but it is about trying to get the most bang for your buck.'

When taking a show from the West End out on tour, that inevitably means making it more mobile and, usually, more svelte. 'With *Pretty Woman*, we're not doing any automation on tour,' Shaw explains. In the West End, scenery is brought on automatically via computer cues, but on tour 'everything is either brought on by actors or winches. It's cheaper, but it's designed so that those transitions will still look elegant and slick. You just have to choreograph something that makes it feel intentional. We already have a language for bellboys dancing, so why can't the bellboys bring on the chaise longue?'

> **There's a big financial difference between six trucks and five trucks. Obviously, we really want everyone to see it, but it is about trying to get the most bang for your buck**
>
> Dominic Shaw, Pretty Woman

PHOTOGRAPHY: Dan Kennedy / Jacob Clarke / Lucy Morris / Deen Van Meer © Disney / Theatre Royal Windsor (AND OVERLEAF)



A great deal of preparing a show to tour is finding ways to minimise expenditure; where the ensemble in the West End had four key wig looks, on tour they will have three. Sometimes that slimming down is to do with the fact that the show has to be able to work in multiple venues, too, Shaw notes. 'When we go to York, they haven't got enough bars to hang all the scenery, so you have to say, "Take that chandelier away, take that light away".'

Much of the logistical jigsaw falls to the production manager – like Jack Greenyer, taking on that key role for the upcoming tour of Emily Beecher's new musical *The Good Enough Mums Club*. It starts for him when the producer gives him a list of dates and venues, and then it's his job to make sure the trucks, cast and crew turn up at the right time in the right place. Inside those trucks are the set, costumes and wigs, plus many tours bring their own lighting and sound equipment as well. 'It's often too difficult to achieve the sound for a musical with in-house stuff,' says Greenyer.

'Different venues have different scales of what they are able to provide,' adds Lucy Morris, stage manager for *The Good Enough Mums Club* (and also Greenyer's partner – together the couple are taking their 18-month-old baby on tour with them). 'We get a tech spec for each venue and then work out what we need to supplement where.'

'It's much simpler and quicker to tour all of the band equipment and the radio mics because we can have them in a rack set up exactly as the show needs, ready to go, rather than trying to find a bit of kit that's on the theatre's tech spec but it's not been used in a while, so it's in a drawer somewhere," comments Greenyer.

When the truck gets to the venue, a receiving team offloads everything, scrutinised by Morris and her meticulous checklist. 'It's all about having really great paperwork that's detailed, but really clear and not full of unnecessary detail.'

I also speak to Darren Lee, head of stage for the first UK tour of Disney's *Aladdin*, a role that involves two main responsibilities. First, he's in charge of unloading the scenery, getting it in the building, constructing the set, making it look right. Lee explains that although the audience sees the spangly front of the set, which aims to convince us we're in Agrabah, the backside of the set is a mass of wood scribbled with letters and numbers and joined together with screws. 'It's a gigantic jigsaw puzzle,' he says.

Then comes his second main job: staying with the show during the run where he's in charge of moving all the scenery on- and offstage during each performance. 'I'm manual labour,' he laughs. 'I do all the pushing and shoving.'

Aladdin is a big tour. After settling in at Edinburgh Playhouse, which has more than 3,000 seats, the show will then move to the Wales Millennium Centre over Christmas, with 2,500 seats. Twelve trucks will transport the set, lighting, costumes and other kit needed to create a whole new world at each new venue, and it's Lee who's responsible for making sure all the set comes off the trucks, dazzles the audience, then goes back on.

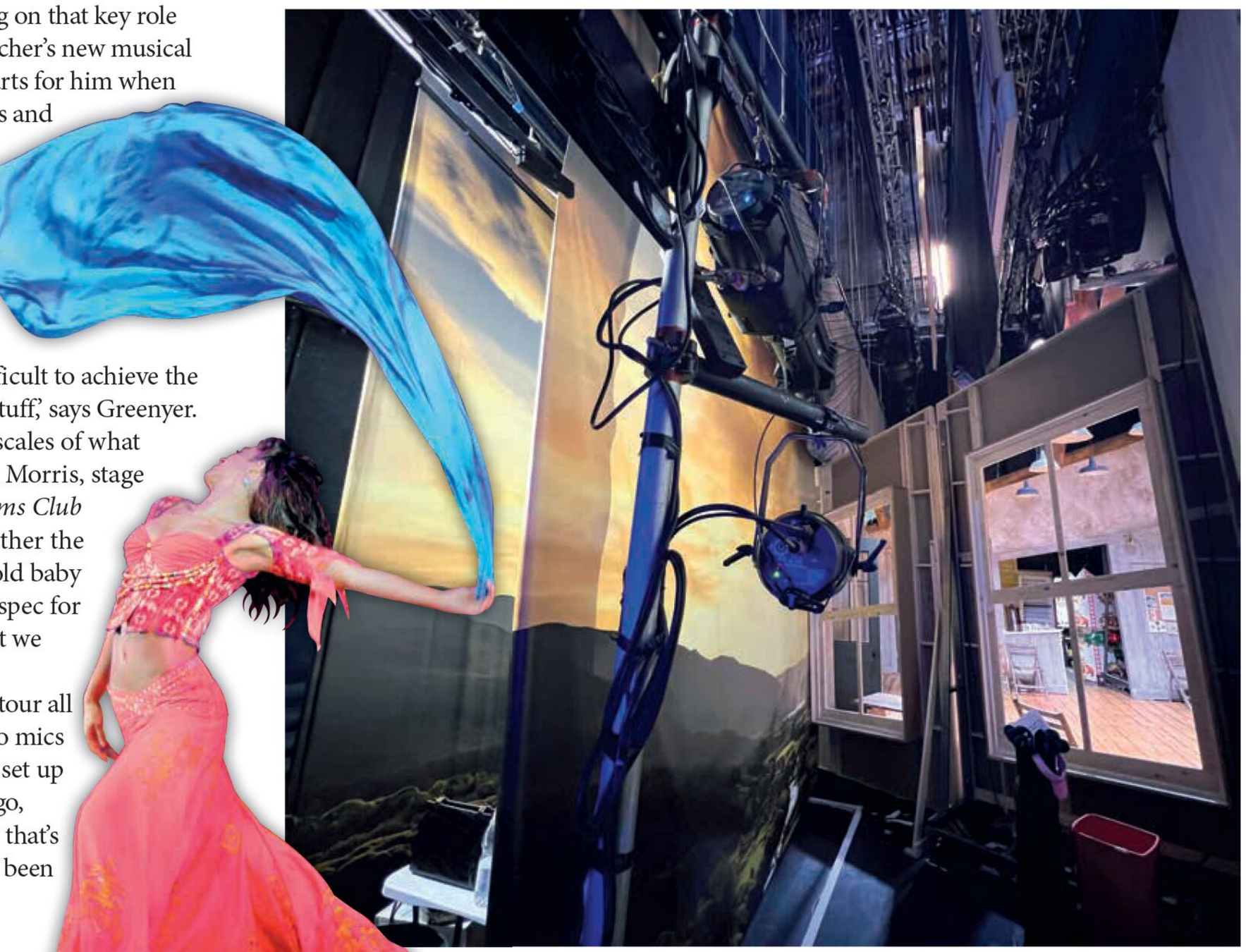
It's also Lee who faces one of the toughest challenges of a touring musical: the astonishingly short amount of time in which to build and tech the show. 'We turn up at the Edinburgh Playhouse on 18 September and then technical rehearsals start in October, so we have three weeks. Then, as the show starts moving, we'll get two days to set up at each new venue, working 8am to about 10pm.'

So from the time the trucks arrive at each new venue to the moment the curtain goes up, Lee has a mere 48 hours to construct the huge show, helped by his deputy, his assistant and what he calls 'an army' of freelance production carpenters hired for the get-in, as well as local crew who come with the venue. When he was working on *The Lion King*, the tour involved a whopping 24 trucks which would arrive at the theatre on a Sunday, then Lee and his team would build non-stop – including night shifts – until the show opened.

Not that any of it fazes Lee in the slightest. 'It can get physically hard. But it's the bit of the job that's interesting. Spending three or four weeks in a venue is nice, but it's the moves that are the exciting bit.'

As the show beds in, the producers are hoping that they've made the right call about each city they've chosen for the tour. Are tickets selling? Are the audiences enjoying it? Are the actors happy with their digs, or are they complaining that things were better in Bedford or Darlington or Swansea?

Below Aladdin on tour; Calendar Girls lights and set are transported into Theatre Royal Windsor



Above Calendar Girls props table, Windsor
Right I Should Be So Lucky starts in Manchester

But once the show is on the road it's too late to change anything. The plotting of a tour is a difficult business, and one that's locked in many months before the show even opens. It isn't just a matter of calling up a theatre and sticking the show in the calendar for a week or two. Every date has to be carefully planned both to match the venue's availability and to make sense logistically; there's no point being in Penzance one night and Aberdeen the next.

There are also, as Shaw has already said, practical considerations at each individual venue: is it big enough to accommodate the set and the technical requirements of the show? As Lee adds: 'The set is designed to fit the smallest theatre on the tour', so knowing those constraints as early as possible is crucial.

But there's no doubt that some shows suit certain cities better than others. When planning the tour of *Kinky Boots*, Darbourne was keen for the show to open in Northampton, where the show is set; for *I Should Be So Lucky* he wanted to open in the huge cities of Manchester and Leeds, 'to make it feel big, to make it feel like a showcase'.

And Shaw reckons that cities can react very differently to the same show: some cities are more conservative, while others, such as Liverpool, he thinks, are much more vocal in their responses. 'When Edward Lewis takes his shirt off, I know they're going to have a good time.'

Shaw is aware that *Pretty Woman* is a title audiences will recognise, and that's already helped shift a huge number of tickets before the tour has even started. For something like *I Should Be So Lucky*, or even *Calendar Girls* when it embarked on its first tour in 2017, newness can work against the economics of a show.

Darbourne knows that taking *I Should Be So Lucky* out on the road is a risk. It's currently booked into 20 venues, but there will have to be many more dates down the line. 'We can't break even on the show in the length of time that we're doing it,' he says. 'I've heard that Beyoncé has 90 trucks. We're trying to get it into four. And the best we can hope for on this initial run is that we can recover 50% of the financing of the £2.4 million it's cost to make the show.'

What's clear is that the 20% increase in touring costs hasn't led Darbourne to simply do things more cheaply. 'One approach to producing is that you scale things back. The other is that you say, "Let's make something really exciting so more people want to come and see it". That's a better way of living and producing. It actually puts pressure on us to really make the show the best it can be.'

Meanwhile, once the run ends, everything goes back into the trucks. 'It all gets counted back in so you know you've not left behind some tiny thing that could cost 50p but would cause a lot of problems if you don't have it for the next show,' explains Morris. On smaller-scale tours, it's often the stage manager or production manager who will drive the truck, while on bigger shows it will be a team of dedicated drivers.

Until the next date rolls around, the trucks will be parked somewhere secure like a warehouse or storage area ('You hear all kinds of horror stories about people's trucks getting nicked if they're parked on the street,' says Greenyer). Then suddenly it's Sunday, and the trucks are off to the next stop, wherever it may be, and the whole travelling circus is in motion once again. M

On tour: new shows heading out this autumn onwards

Everybody's Talking About Jamie
Continues Theatre Royal, Nottingham: 25-30 Sep 2023
everybodystalkingaboutjamie.co.uk/tour-dates-book-tickets

Calendar Girls
Continues Everyman Theatre, Cheltenham: 26-30 Sep 2023
kenwright.com

The Drifters Girl
Continues Lyceum Theatre, Sheffield: 26-30 Sep 2023
the driftersgirl.com/uk-ireland-tour

Jesus Christ Superstar
Continues Theatre Royal, Newcastle: 26-30 Sep 2023
uktour.jesuschristsuperstar.com/tickets

Shrek
Continues New Wimbledon Theatre, London: 26-30 Sep 2023
shrekuktour/#tour-dates

Pretty Woman
Starts Alexandra Theatre, Birmingham: 17-28 Oct 2023
london.prettywomanthemusical.com/tour

Madagascar The Musical
Starts Theatre Royal, Plymouth: 20-28 Oct 2023
madagascarthemusical.couk/tour-dates

Aladdin
Starts Playhouse, Edinburgh: 24 Oct – 19 Nov 2023
aladdinthemusical.co.uk

The Good Enough Mums Club
Starts Hippodrome, Birmingham: 25-29 Oct
goodenoughmumsclub.com/book

I Should Be So Lucky
Starts Opera House, Manchester: 2-25 Nov 2023
soluckymusical.com

Hamilton
Starts Palace Theatre, Manchester: 11 Nov 2023 – 24 Feb 2024
hamiltonmusical.com/uk-tour

Fantastically Great Women Who Changed the World
Starts New Wimbledon Theatre, London: 30 Nov – 2 Dec 2023
fantasticallygreatwomenthemusical.com

Wicked
Starts Playhouse Theatre, Edinburgh: 7 Dec 2023 – 14 Jan 2024
wickedthemusical.co.uk/tour

The Wizard of Oz
Starts Empire Theatre, Liverpool: 13 Dec 2023 – 7 Jan 2024
uktour.wizardofozmusical.com

Bonnie & Clyde
Starts Curve Theatre, Leicester: 22-24 February 2024
bonnieandyclydemusical.com

An Officer and a Gentleman
Starts Alexandra Theatre, Birmingham: 23 Feb – 2 Mar 2024
officerandagentlemanthemusical.com

Come From Away
Starts Curve Theatre, Leicester: 1-9 Mar 2024
comefromawaylondon.co.uk/tour-dates

Chitty Chitty Bang Bang
Starts Mayflower Theatre, Southampton: 30 Apr – 12 May 2024
chittyontour.com

For further information on some of these touring shows, see our Listings on pages 76-80

I am music
I live through your moments
Your first shake of the rattle
Your recorder lesson
Your match day anthem
Your queueing anticipation
Your hands in the air
Your main stage mayhem
Your favourite movie scene
Your first dance
Your last night of the proms
Your family singalong
Your swan song.

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Labour of Love

Despite multiple taped versions of Oklahoma!, the complete show in its original version has never been preserved on record until now. Conductor **John Wilson** talks to **David Benedict** about his journey to capture every bar of Rodgers and Hammerstein's 1943 masterpiece for Chandos Records

A smash hit from the moment it opened on Broadway on 31 March 1943, *Oklahoma!* changed the face, the feel and even the fortunes of Musical Theatre. It's an overused word, but this inaugural musical from the then all-new partnership of Broadway composer Richard Rodgers and book writer/lyricist Oscar Hammerstein II truly is iconic. As much-revived as it is famous, the show is awash with firsts, not the least of which is that it was the very first musical to receive an original cast recording.

Before *Oklahoma!* came along, no show had ever been captured in its original form. Anyone wanting to hear a Broadway score had to be in the audience. The only recordings were cover versions of songs performed by different artists with their own bands and arrangements.

But the demand for a recording of this new hit, Broadway's first melodically and dramatically thought-through musical play, was so high that in

Left John Wilson in conductor mode **Above** The creatives, musicians and artists recording Oklahoma!

September 1943, Decca Records took the full company into a recording studio. Exactly 80 years ago, that recording pre-dated LPs, let alone CDs. *Oklahoma!* was released as a set of six double-sided 78rpm discs that, to the amazement and delight of everyone on a royalty, sold an eye-widening one million copies.

That led to the company recording more of the show's numbers, and it's those twin sessions that you now hear on CD and streaming. But even that was far from complete. Despite umpteen subsequent recorded versions, the whole show in its original version has never been heard. Until now.

It's a gap that conductor John Wilson has long been eager to fill. Together with his own multi-award-winning orchestra, the Sinfonia of London – composed of expert instrumental freelancers bunking off from day jobs as leading players of orchestras and ensembles from across the UK and Europe – he and Chandos Records are launching a series of complete musicals that have never been fully recorded in their original form.

He's more than respectful of the 1943 recording but immediately identifies its chief problem: it's closer to a greatest hits compilation. 'The numbers are incomplete. The Overture is cut, whole sections from songs are gone, the entr'acte, dance music, the ballet: all cut. All the vital connective tissue is missing. So, for the first time, this new recording gives us every bar. Equally importantly, the sound is a re-creation of exactly what Rodgers and his celebrated orchestrator Robert Russell Bennett wrote.'

Anyone who saw the recent, excitingly radical Broadway version of *Oklahoma!* at London's Young Vic or the Wyndham's Theatre will have heard the score but in a style consciously changed. This was *Oklahoma!* in bluegrass, folk mode with a seven-piece band of electric guitar, pedal steel guitar, acoustic guitar, banjo, violin, cello, mandolin, bass and drums. That's a very far cry from the original, which boasted a band of 28. It had 16 string players plus everything from brass, bass and drums to oboe, cor anglais, oboe d'amore and bass oboe. And Wilson has gathered together those exact forces.

That doesn't mean he's taking a dry, museum-like approach; he's open to the idea of reinterpretation. 'But if a director is interested in their own take on a piece, they need to know what it really is that they're departing from. These pieces are called "musicals" after all, and the music, the delivery of it, and the clothing in which the music is presented [form] an essential part.

'If you cast the orchestra with as much care as the principals and the ensemble, you'll hear that the orchestra is the beating heart of the piece. It's not a luxury bolt-on extra. Together with Bennett's orchestrations they're as much part of the emotional thrust of the work as everything and everyone else. Without them, you lose something of fundamental importance.'

Cast albums are traditionally recorded in a single day following the opening of a show. This was recorded over a full week in which singing actors and musicians were brought together and honed into an ensemble. And Wilson knew what he wanted.

'Things like 10 violinists who all play with the same style, who all know how to play one of these 1940s numbers. And making sure we have a guitarist on the right instrument and who understands the period style. And brass players with experience of playing in dance bands.'

The precise sound quality is of utmost importance. In musicals these days, voices and instruments are on microphones, with all sound amplified. What audiences hear is no longer natural: it's controlled though mixing by the sound desk via giant loudspeakers. 'But these orchestrations were designed to work without microphones – and that's how we present it,' explains Wilson. 'We recorded in a theatrical acoustic with the singers standing amid the orchestra.'

But there are, as Wilson is fully aware, pitfalls to studio recordings. In 1985, no less a figure than Leonard Bernstein conducted a famously misguided studio version of his own Musical Theatre masterpiece, *West Side Story*. As well as the massively beefed-up orchestra, he cast starry, mature operatic voices in almost all the main roles who oversang their carefully written roles of teenagers. Poor José Carreras, one of the celebrated 'Three Tenors', stumbled across the syncopated rhythms and, worse, couldn't lose his Spanish accent while playing all-American Tony, the one character who must on no account sound even slightly Spanish.

All of that was caught on disc and on an accompanying TV documentary – a must-watch for all the wrong reasons, and so famous it was spoofed by French and Saunders. With a huge

Above Wilson leads this pivotal recording **Below** Sandra Marvin as Aunt Eller and Jamie Parker as Will

Above Reuniting with John Wilson, Sierra Boggess plays Laurey; Rodney Earl Clarke sings the role of Jud

marketing campaign behind it, it racked up such impressive sales that other classic musicals were rushed into the studio, almost all yielding similarly wildly unidiomatic recordings in which singers who claimed to have loved this material all their lives merely condescended to it.

On the flip side, three years later, American conductor John McGlinn changed the face of Musical Theatre recordings with a three-LP/two-CD set of the classic 1927 musical *Show Boat* replete with original orchestrations and acres of newly reconstituted material cut during the show's many incarnations. And it's this tradition that Wilson emulates, not least in his choice of singers.

'I scoured the globe for people who have long experience with this material,' notes Wilson. 'They had to be entirely in sympathy with the discipline it takes to deliver it. You could say, "It's just a record so you don't need actors"… but the opposite is true. Because it's a record, to get the material across, all you have is vocal characterisation.'

That's why his cast and chorus are filled with singers who are more than happy with theatrical roles. Laurey, the pivotal leading part, is sung by Sierra Boggess, a longstanding Wilson collaborator who also created the role of Ariel in Broadway's *The Little Mermaid* and famously sang Christine in both *The Phantom of the Opera* in Las Vegas and on Broadway – plus its sequel, *Love Never Dies*, in the West End.

Opposite her, as cowboy Curly, Wilson has cast American actor Nathaniel Hackmann, currently starring as Biff in the Broadway transfer of musical *Back to the Future*, but who also sang the Gene Kelly role of Gabey in Wilson's Prom of Bernstein's *On the Town* and, better yet, sang Curly when Wilson conducted the complete *Oklahoma!* at a televised Prom in 2017.

Jamie Parker, his Will, sang a raft of Frank Sinatra songs for Wilson's Sinatra tribute at the 2015 BBC Proms. He shot to fame in the original cast of *The History Boys*, recently nailed the title role in *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button,* and is currently starring in *Next to Normal*.

The other aspect of the recording that Wilson holds dear is the fact that in addition to being the first complete record, in every sense, of the show as created, it stands as a tribute to the late Bruce Pomahac of The Rodgers & Hammerstein Organization.

Until the 1960s, no one took care of musicals' orchestral parts. They were literally abandoned or lost. Until Pomahac created these definitive texts – he also did *Carousel*, which Wilson has recorded for release in 2024 – anyone attempting to present the show had to work from severely compromised and corrupted versions.

'Bruce spent years going back to the original manuscripts, tracking down and collating all the orchestral parts, incorporating changes made en route to Broadway. He told me the second violin part for "People Will Say We're in Love" had been missing for 40 years. Thanks to him, we now have complete performing editions in which every note is what Richard Rodgers and Robert Russell Bennett wrote.'

Which makes this recording akin to cleaning a dirty, faded Old Master painting and discovering details and colours unseen for decades. 'It's worse than that: the scores were so corrupted that it's like discovering that their work had been replaced with different music inserted by people with no authority at all to do so,' says Wilson.

'A recording like this allows everyone to take, to a degree, a step back in time… but it's a step much closer to the truth.' M

See our review on page 68; hear our Sierra Boggess podcast at musicalsmagazine.com/podcasts; Wilson tours this November – visit sinfoniaoflondon.com

PHOTOGRAPHY: Chris Christodoulou

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Striving to be
young stars

PHOTOGRAPHY: Manuel Harlan © RSC / Coloures-Pic@stock.adobe.com / Youngn's / Brookside Theatre, Romford

Aside from possessing bags of talent, child performers have to be resilient and independent – and families need to be fully committed too. **Matthew Hemley** talks to parents, kids, agents and teachers about the thrills and challenges of growing up on the stage

Jan Pretorius had a plan for his 14-year-old son, Jaden Christopher, and it didn't involve the performing arts. 'I tried to push him down the sports route,' Pretorius admits. 'But one day I realised it wasn't for him. I'd taken him to a drumming lesson: the teacher put a bunch of notes in front of him and he got it so quickly. I thought: "I have to back off here – he's obviously got a better calling."'

That calling has seen Jaden following his dream: appearing in commercials and a TV series, voiceover work and taking to the stage, mainly with the British Theatre Academy (BTA). This year he joins the prestigious Brit School, and he's also had a stint at the Sylvia Young Theatre School – an institution that has spawned talent such as Keeley Hawes, Amy Winehouse, Frances Ruffelle and Rob Madge.

As the father of a seven-year-old who loves a bit of the spotlight, I've seen first-hand how extracurricular performance classes can bring joy to young people. It doesn't matter that they may not end up doing it professionally, because that initial taste of performing offers them so much – not least confidence, communication skills, working as part of a team and, for many, finding an outlet for creativity that may have otherwise gone unnurtured in mainstream education.

There are many organisations that supply this 'first taste', including Perform and Stagecoach. They offer part-time courses for a variety of ages – with the emphasis very much on having fun, though it can lead to more. Amelie Rouse discovered her passion for performing at Stagecoach Twickenham on Saturday afternoons. Having secured an agent, she recently performed in *The Great British Bake Off Musical* in the West End.

'I was at school when they told my mum I'd got the part,' she explains. When she found out, as she recalls, 'I was speechless – I was a bit squeaky and couldn't believe it really.' Her subsequent experience in the show was unequivocally positive. 'It was really fun and I really enjoyed it,' she says. 'It was disappointing when it ended.'

Emily Keston runs Keston & Keston, which specialises in child casting and also manages the process for shows that feature children – everything from first night to closing night, such as licensing, chaperones and dealing with parents. Along with her twin sister L-J, she casts shows like *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, currently on tour, and musicals including *Oliver!* and the festive favourite *Nativity!*

When they're seeing kids, they keep the process as open as possible. 'We cast children from newcomers to those who have been in shows before,' Keston explains. 'Sometimes we do open calls and see people

Left West End's Matilda **Right** Jaden Christopher in Elf in Romford
Below Amelie Rouse in Bake Off at the Noël Coward Theatre

with no experience. We have lots of different ways of finding talent, including traditional ways like casting directory Spotlight or contact with agents. But we have also developed an app for casting shows which means we can see people who are not represented.'

The audition is the first part, she says, of an adventure that 'may change a child's course or route for life'. 'For us it's not about getting the part, but the experience of the process,' Keston adds. 'However, if they do get the role, we work with them and the parents to make sure they're ready. It's a big commitment for the child and family, but a really exciting one in most cases.'

When a child is cast, they need to be prepared for the nature of the job. 'I would say it's not for the majority of children,' says Sam Jarman who, along with Lottie Robinson, runs Youngn's, an agency representing young people. 'It's incredible and life-affirming. But there are late nights, and you still have to get all your schoolwork done. Some of the adults may get to lie in bed the day after a show – kids still have to go to school.'

The support offered to children varies. 'We've had some shows where the kids have been unsupported mentally – really big problems,' she explains. 'But most of the time, children are very much considered and their wellness comes first.' Jarman says she has to trust that a production with a child in the room who is not enjoying themselves has a Plan B. 'There is an outdated concept of "the show must go on". But when it comes to kids, no it doesn't actually. The child has to come first.'

Matthew Chandler is the founder and chief executive of BTA. He understands the toll that the pressure of performing can take on young people – particularly if their show has international investors with big

PHOTOGRAPHY: Paul Coltas / Lisa Stevens / Youngn's

Above and Right Lola Green (second from right), with BTA's Chloe Raphael (left) and Zoe Akinyosade as Annie

> **There is an outdated concept of 'the show must go on', but when it comes to kids, no it doesn't actually. The child has to come first**
>
> Sam Jarman, Youngn's

expectations – but he's seeing some improvement. 'There was a time when parents were afraid to speak out if their children were having a bad time, feeling that if they don't do everything right their children will never be used again. But I think there has been a shift.'

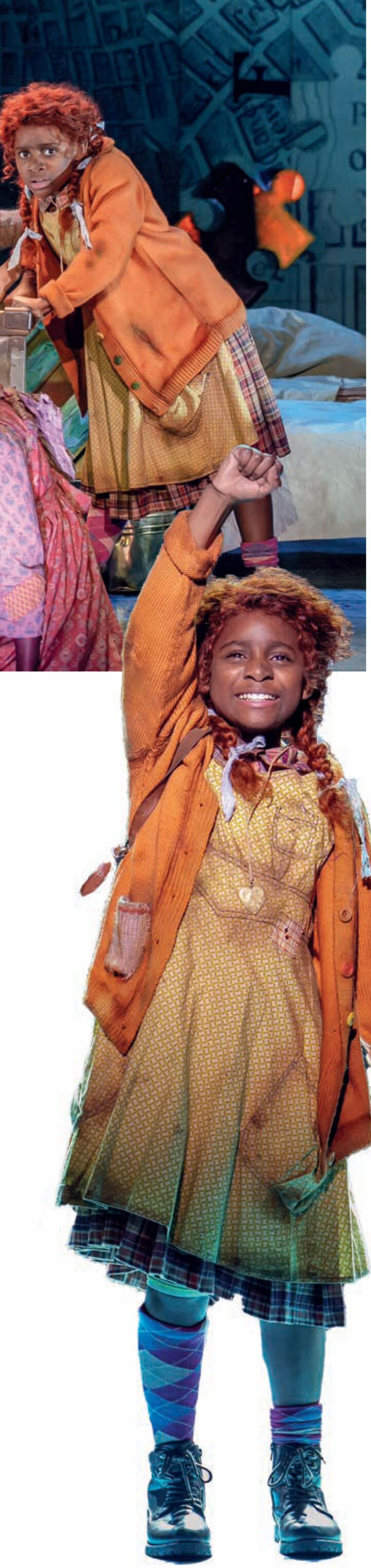
That's not to say there aren't still challenges. While touring, for example, can be 'an incredible opportunity', says Jarman, it's also 'a massive deal', because it can require being away from home, with a week on the road and then a week back in school, depending on the schedules. 'That's why it's important shows have a children's manager, which is the case more and more now – to really look after the kids and not just think about things from a show's perspective, but from a wellbeing perspective too.'

Lisa Stevens has acted as a chaperone, which means accompanying children when they're working on a show to ensure their welfare. Her own daughter, Halle, has also been in musicals such as *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. She explains how, legally, children have to do 15 hours of schoolwork when they're on tour, working with a tutor to cover what they'd be doing in the classroom. The kids do get time to speak to their parents, but usually only at the beginning and end of each day.

When Halle was touring with one musical, Stevens observed that she was having a hard time. 'There had been a cast change, and Halle had just one day at home before going to Dublin for three weeks. I noticed she was struggling with her mental health, as she missed her friends,' she says.

Ten-year-old Lola Green has appeared in touring musicals and also experienced both highs and lows on the road. 'The first time I went on tour was the first time I'd properly been away from my mum,' she says. 'So I was really scared and homesick. The experience is nerve-racking – but also exciting.'

She adds: 'You get trains up to the hotels, and you share a room with someone your own age. It's like a six-night



sleepover. I'm sad when I'm not with my mum, but I know she's supporting me, so you just go for it.' And Lola declares that being on stage ignites a feeling like no other. 'You look up and see all the seating levels, and look around and think "I am in the story now" – and that is very, very cool.'

Children who work on shows can also end up going on their own journeys. Stevens says she saw a huge change in Halle during the tour. 'They go from being at home and having everything done for them to doing things like their own hair,' she says. 'I don't think we anticipated how independent she would be. They grow up really quickly.' Keston agrees: 'It's special to see that personal growth, as by the time they leave they are completely different children. It's amazing.'

It's special for the family, too, but it can come at a cost. 'One thing you're not aware of beforehand is the sacrifices you make as a family,' Stevens notes. 'I was the parent who went to every venue Halle appeared at. But I wouldn't change it for anything. Seeing a child onstage doing something they love is unbelievable.'

While Stevens has seen her child flourish overall, Jarman is clear that families need to be realistic about a tough industry. 'Parents are sometimes less aware than children are,' she explains. 'They'll say, "My daughter wants to be in *Matilda*". It's important to manage expectations, as you have to be very good and it's competitive. I would say, do it because you love it. And if you can't work professionally, go and join a local youth theatre or Stagecoach or BTA, something that gives you joy, rather than looking for the big professional opportunities. If you're good enough, they'll find you.'

Above Lola Green with Lottie of Youngn's Youth Talent Agency
Below left Halle Stevens (far left) takes a bow in touring Joseph

Jarman also says it's clear when a child wants to perform, versus when it's a 'pushy parent' driving the decisions. 'For us it's really important the child wants to do it and the parent is there to support them,' she says, adding that they interview the children they take on, and work with a psychological consultant to make sure they pay attention to how those questions are asked.

Jarman also highlights how children need to be prepared for the cut-throat reality of auditions. They may not understand that there are a huge number of practical reasons, aside from talent, as to whether or not they're offered the part. 'It's to do with making sure the cast fits together as a group,' she explains. 'And then there's the curse of being too tall – most musicals have a cut-off height.' The cut-off for *Matilda* is 4'10", she notes, 'and the kids in *Frozen* can't be over 4'5"" – although there are, she says, opportunities elsewhere without height restrictions.

Even for those who do get to audition, there's the reality of radio silence afterwards. As 14-year-old Jaden explains: 'You rarely hear back, unless it's saying you have a part or telling you that you've been recalled for the next audition. Once you've done a self-tape, you have to let it go, otherwise you'll hold on to it and there will be a lot of stress.' So, what makes it all worth it? Jaden has a pretty good idea: 'It's a really fun industry, and the friends you make in rehearsals are lifelong friends.'

Keston agrees, and adds that there are more opportunities than ever. 'There are so many productions out there looking for young talent,' she says. 'I always say to people, don't be afraid of putting your child's hat in the ring – get involved, as you never know what may happen.' M

For more information on the organisations mentioned here, visit kestonandkestoncasting.com; syts.co.uk; thebritishtheatreacademy.com; youngns.uk; brit.croydon.sch.uk; stagecoach.co.uk; perform.org.uk

Need to know ⊢ as quoted in Children in Theatre (2012, Oberon) by Jo Hawes

Licensing
Children under school-leaving age have to be licensed to perform; a license is granted by the child's local authority.

Education
Children must receive 15 hours of schooling per week while working.

Timings
Children can work 3.5 hours, for a performance or rehearsal, and then must have a 1.5 hour break before another 3.5 hour performance or rehearsal.

Chaperones
Chaperones have to know the law, and they have to like children! A chaperone must have endless patience and be good at multitasking – he or she will often have to look after several noisy children for hours at a time.

Leading children's casting director Jo Hawes died in April 2023

Live show reviews

The most exciting and significant performances of new and recently revived productions in the UK, the US and further afield, all reviewed in detail by our panel of Musical Theatre experts

Annie Get Your Gun

Irving Berlin music, lyrics **Herbert & Dorothy Fields** book **Peter Stone** book revision
Lavender Theatre, Epsom, Surrey 17 July – 5 August 2023
REVIEWED ON 21 JULY 2023

UK LIVE SHOWS

The new Lavender Theatre hits the target with Annie Get Your Gun: the company (left), plus sharpshooter lovers Frank (Charlie McCullagh) and Annie Oakley (SuRie)

Irving Berlin's score for *Annie Get Your Gun* is one of the best of the 1940s, featuring a string of bangers (sorry). But, even discounting its dated attitudes towards gender and race, is it a great musical in the theatrical sense? First performed in 1946 and produced by Rodgers and Hammerstein following their revolutionary *Oklahoma!* and *Carousel*, the flimsy book by Herbert and Dorothy Fields marks it out as a toe-tapping entertainment (nothing wrong with that) rather than the integrated musical it could have been.

Last revived as a full production at the Young Vic in 2009, Simon Hardwick's straightforward staging does illustrate why this musical hasn't been given the Chichester or Regent's Park treatment, but it provides a diverting evening of summer entertainment at Epsom's idyllic new Lavender Theatre. A wooden set design by the multitasking Hardwick and Joe McNeice evokes the itinerant lifestyles of travelling players and transports us to small-town America where 'There's No Business Like Show Business' for the performers who 'smile when they are low' for the audiences who flock to see them.

The NRA must love this musical as it shows how profitable talent with a rifle can be – one of several elements that we might now consider problematic. Peter Stone's revised libretto for the 1999 Broadway production does excise the worst of the racism and makes the romantic conclusion more egalitarian. Still, Chief Sitting Bull (Jay Faisca) speaks in broken English, and his 'adoption' of Annie Oakley into his tribe and the seizure of his land are both breezed over.

You've gotta get a gimmick, as we well know from *Gypsy*, and this female sharpshooter proves an asset to Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. Annie also immediately falls for star Frank following a mansplaining meet-cute and isn't shy about declaring her feelings. Although she starts wearing a skirt when she enters showbiz, she isn't required to be glamorised so that the guy can see her in a new light – unlike her 1953 Warner Brothers counterpart Calamity Jane.

> "SuRie makes a splendid debut as the scrappy Annie, with natural comic timing"

In his programme note, Hardwick comments that his main directorial aim is to showcase emotion, and that is indeed where this particular production shines. Hammerstein's influence is particularly apparent in 'They Say It's Wonderful', a gorgeous example of a conditional love song that's beautifully performed here. The seven-piece band led by Debbi Clarke is exemplary, featuring a bluegrass flavour.

Recording artist (and former Eurovision entrant) SuRie makes a splendid debut as the scrappy Annie. She has natural comic timing and Liza Minnelli-esque expressiveness, with a voice that marries brashness and tenderness. There's also strong chemistry with Charlie McCullagh's devilishly handsome Frank, and it seems believable that his yucky ideas about his dream woman ('As soft and as pink as a nursery') might change with experience.

However, the book feels mean-spirited towards Frank's assistant and unrequited love Dolly Tate (Chlöe Hart), a single woman of 37 who descends into a stereotypical harridan, and while the secondary lovers Winnie and Tommy (Nina Bell and Joseph Vella) are good dancers, their subplot never comes to life.

If story isn't the first half's greatest strength, it dissipates entirely in the second half, despite numbers including 'I Got the Sun in the Morning' and 'I Got Lost in His Arms'. Much of it feels as if it's leading up to the 11 o'clock number 'Anything You Can Do (I Can Do Better)' – a pay-off well worth waiting for, in which SuRie and McCullagh let loose.

The wide stage is a challenge: it feels like watching a tennis match at times. But this inaugural production is clearly a labour of love, and one certainly hopes that the Lavender Theatre will be a success. It's such a charming addition to the summer theatre scene and could, in time, become a real destination venue.

Julia Rank

Production credits

Cast SuRie, Charlie McCullagh, Nina Bell, Joe Boyle, Elliot Broadfoot, Kyerron Dixon-Bassey, Jay Faisca, Marisa Harris, Chlöe Hart, Holly Lawrence, AJ Lewis, Joseph Vella
Direction, choreography Simon Hardwick
Musical direction Debbi Clarke
Musical supervision Matthew Spalding
Set, costumes Simon Hardwick, Joe McNeice
Lighting Adam King
Sound Richard Carter

PHOTOGRAPHY: Harry Elletson

Everybody's Talking About Jamie

Dan Gillespie Sells music **Tom MacRae** lyrics, book
The Lowry, Salford 7-17 September 2023, then touring
REVIEWED ON 12 SEPTEMBER 2023

Ivano Turco with Rebecca McKinnis and Shobna Gulati, John Partridge in Loco Chanelle mode; Jamie is confronted by Miss Hedge (Hayley Tamaddon) and class

The *Jamie* juggernaut shows no sign of stopping. It's hard to believe that it was just six years ago that Dan Gillespie Sells and Tom MacRae's life-affirming, coming-of-age, drags-to-riches musical (from original director Jonathan Butterell's idea) first strutted onto the stage at the Crucible Theatre in Sheffield, immediately winning over audiences and – after just 19 performances – earning itself a West End transfer.

After a three-year stint at London's Apollo Theatre and a 2020 UK tour (both stymied by Covid), plus a so-so 2021 film adaptation which perhaps leant a bit too heavily into the show's fairy-tale aspects and exposed some of the story's dramatic weaknesses, this second UK touring production sees *Everybody's Talking About Jamie* in possibly its rudest health yet.

A lot of that is down to Ivano Turco, who thrums with positivity as Jamie in a way that seems to turbo-charge every aspect of director Matt Ryan's slickly staged production. The mechanics and movement of the show have always impressed, but the scene changes – especially designer Anna Fleischle's now iconic mobile school desks – and the timing of the dance ensemble, propulsively choreographed by Kate Prince, are now honed to perfection.

Every new Jamie brings something slightly different to the party and Turco, fresh from originating the role of Prince Sebastian in Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Cinderella* and alternating as Bob Marley in *Get Up, Stand Up! The Bob Marley Musical*, has possibly the strongest voice of any incumbent yet. With his vocal trills, bleach-blonde cornrows and megawatt smile, Turco has the peacocking, attention-grabbing side of Jamie's personality down to a tee, and proves particularly adept with the extra comedy one-liners that lightly pepper the script (including a cheeky Harry Styles reference).

But he also nails the character's insecurities and self-doubt. This is evident as the story darkens and the wheels of Jamie's journey start to come off, with Turco's raw, emotional performance of 'Ugly in This Ugly World' turning a song that isn't usually a showstopper into the standout number from Act Two.

> "Ivano Turco thrums with positivity as Jamie, turbo-charging the production"

Any new incarnation of the show also stands and falls on the partnership between Jamie and his mum Margaret. Here, the production scores again with Rebecca McKinnis, whose confidence and familiarity from playing the role in the West End shines through. She's a more brittle and vulnerable version of Margaret than some of the other powerhouses who have played the role, but her quietly unswerving bond with Turco's Jamie is touchingly believable. And her delivery of the line 'He's my baby!' in the closing moments of the heart-wrenching 'He's My Boy' is particularly devastating.

After the emotional fireworks of that song and the similarly touching duet 'My Man, Your Boy', the showdown at the school prom that follows can feel a bit panto-like and anticlimactic. But this, too, packs more of a satisfyingly dramatic punch than before.

Elsewhere in the cast, Hayley Tamaddon brings a sparky presence to Miss Hedge, even if, as with others who have played the part, her opposition and hostility towards Jamie isn't entirely convincing. As Hugo, John Partridge does his best with the Sheffield accent and takes a while to find his rhythm. But he comes alive once Hugo transforms into his drag alter ego Loco Chanelle. He hasn't got the strongest of voices but he imbues his songs with a distinctive Bowie-like drawl and, importantly, convincingly portrays Hugo's compassionate side, understandably making him the only adult male in Jamie's life that he can really depend on.

Also providing sterling support is Talia Palamathanan, who steps up from previously playing classmate Becca and understudying Pritti to give a charming performance as Jamie's bookish best friend. Her delicate rendition of 'It Means Beautiful' is enhanced by the enchanting galaxy of stars beamed onto her bedroom wall by Luke Halls's video projections. It is one of many moments where this production's staging is as uplifting as Sells and MacRae's endlessly tuneful songs and as life-enhancing as the central message Jamie's story conveys.

Chris Bartlett

Production credits

Cast Ivano Turco, Rebecca McKinnis, Shobna Gulati, Talia Palamathanan, Hayley Tamaddon, John Partridge, Jordan Ricketts *et al*
Direction Matt Ryan (originally Jonathan Butterell)
Musical direction Danny Belton
Choreography Kate Prince
Set, costumes Anna Fleischle
Lighting Lucy Carter
Sound Paul Groothuis

PHOTOGRAPHY: Matt Crockett

Hairspray

Marc Shaiman music, lyrics **Scott Wittman** lyrics
Mark O'Donnell, Thomas Meehan book
Kilworth House Theatre, Leicestershire 27 June – 6 August 2023
REVIEWED ON 9 JULY 2023

Michael J Batchelor as Edna and Steven Serlin's Wilbur get cosy; great chums Penny and Tracy (Biancha Szynal, Charlotte-Hannah Jones); the Hairspray company

Turn left at Kilworth House's tree-lined lake, cross over the winding bridge strung with colourful fairy lights, and you'll find yourself in a wooded glade that forms the entrance to one of the UK's most picturesque theatres. Add in the first outdoor production of the effervescent musical *Hairspray*, and the stage is set for a magical summer evening.

Hairspray has long been a favourite of audiences and critics alike, thanks to its snappy book, bouncy 1960s-style songs by Marc Shaiman and Scott Wittman, and ever-relevant themes of overcoming prejudice. Based on John Waters's 1988 comedy film about a plucky plus-size teenager who dreams of dancing on television, the musical hit Broadway in 2002 and scooped eight Tony Awards. A West End production followed in 2007, winning four Oliviers, and a movie adaptation featuring a cast stacked with Hollywood royalty was released the same year.

Kilworth House Theatre's production fully embraces the musical's exuberance. Paul Farnsworth's set is no shrinking violet: the walls and floor are covered in a kaleidoscope of psychedelic shapes and colours, and lightbulb-edged 'Applause' signs jostle for space with Ultra-Clutch hairspray ads. Yet it's a credit to the vibrant cast that the set all but fades into the background when the show begins and we meet the big-haired, sparkly-shoed, petticoat-swishing residents of 1960s Baltimore.

Charlotte-Hannah Jones is our wannabe star Tracy Turnblad, equipped with a heart full of optimism and a school satchel full of hairspray cans. Jones's joyful energy and clear voice never waver and she perfectly embodies Tracy's belief in the possibility of a better world without racism or sizeism, as well as her wide-eyed crush on crooner Link Larkin (Isaac J Lewis at this performance). She draws the eye in group dance numbers too, though the whole cast faultlessly executes Lee Proud's buoyant, era-appropriate choreography.

Jones is surrounded by stellar talent. Biancha Szynal is a charming bundle of nervous energy as Tracy's all-elbows friend Penny, and Nay-Nay is fiercely charismatic as Seaweed. Jenny Gayner drips with acid as bigoted TV producer Velma, doing her best to keep *The Corny Collins Show* segregated.

> "A near-faultless musical production that rivals West End shows in terms of quality"

Michael J Batchelor gets the most laughs as Tracy's kind, plus-size mother Edna. The role's previous inhabitants include Harvey Fierstein, Michael Ball and John Travolta, but Batchelor more than holds his own, giving us a warm, likeable character whose love for her daughter helps her to rediscover her own confidence and dreams.

The show's most striking moment comes from Ayesha Maynard as Motormouth Maybelle, who provides a powerhouse performance of 'I Know Where I've Been', the gospel song about the fight for racial equality. It may be a coincidence that the sun has set and night is beginning to fall over Kilworth at the same moment as she sings of finding a light in the darkness, but it couldn't have been planned any better, and her heartfelt acknowledgement of the weight of history and her hope for the future is pitch-perfect.

If there's a sour note in the production, it's the perplexing characterisation of the three roles that make up Female Authority Figure (a gym teacher, prison officer and Penny's mother). Catherine Morris plays them all as lecherous and pushes for comedy in the abuses of power, with plenty of sexual gestures which feel out of place and uncomfortable.

That aside, this is a near-faultless production that rivals West End shows in terms of quality. Even the challenges of the outdoors are deftly handled, with Chris Whybrow's crystal-clear sound design allowing every note and lyric to be heard perfectly, and Jason Taylor's lighting taking advantage of the encroaching darkness to drench the final numbers in vivid reds and blues.

'You Can't Stop the Beat' is one of the catchiest finales ever written, and it doesn't fail to leave the audience clapping along, buoyed not only by the beat but also by the show's empowering and inclusive message.

Laura Lott

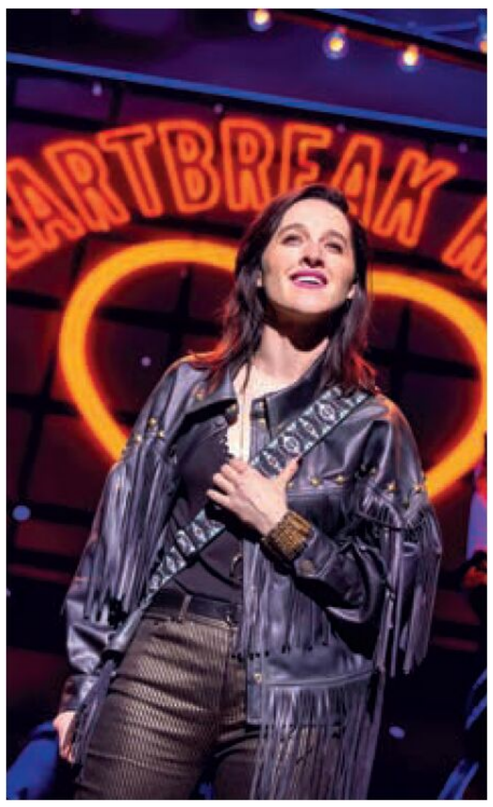
Production credits

Cast Charlotte-Hannah Jones, Michael J Batchelor, Steven Serlin, Jenny Gayner, Holly Willock, Isaac J Lewis, Nay-Nay, Ayesha Maynard, Liam Doyle, Biancha Szynal, Catherine Morris *et al*
Direction, choreography Lee Proud
Musical supervision, direction Michael Bradley
Set, costumes Paul Farnsworth
Lighting Jason Taylor
Sound Chris Whybrow

PHOTOGRAPHY: John Fox

In Dreams

Roy Orbison music, lyrics **David West Read** book
Leeds Playhouse 3 July – 5 August 2023
REVIEWED ON 22 JULY 2023



Oliver Tompsett is both goofy and credible as Ramsey and has sparky chemisty with the mesmerising Lena Hall as Kenna (centre); the full In Dreams company

'Do we really need another jukebox musical?' is a question many theatre-goers have been asking recently, but in the case of *In Dreams* I'm happy to report that the answer is a resounding yes. This new musical produced by Leeds Playhouse uses the songs of Roy Orbison to tell an original and often beautiful story of love, grief and finding strength in togetherness.

It never falls into the trap of having the story serve the songs; here, Orbison's back catalogue is reinterpreted and elevated, making it seem like the songs were written for these characters. Soaring ballads like 'Love Hurts' and upbeat rocky tracks such as 'You Got It' combine to make a perfectly balanced show.

In Dreams has a warm, witty book by David West Read, best known for writing the libretto for *& Juliet* and working on tender-hearted sitcom *Schitt's Creek*. He reunites with *& Juliet*'s Luke Sheppard, who once again directs, but while the former show is big and splashy, *In Dreams* is an intimate, character-driven tale that takes place almost entirely in one location.

That would be family-run Mexican restaurant Felices Sueños, where tacos, margaritas and memorial services are the order of the day. It's the offer of these 'celebration of life' events that draws in singer Kenna Ryan. Her semi-successful country-rock band Heartbreak Radio split 15 years ago. Having just received a troubling diagnosis, Kenna wants to get the band back together for one last party, without revealing her reasons why.

Felices Sueños is brought to life by Arnulfo Maldonado's simple but effective set, decorated with neon bar signs, vintage paintings and pops of bright yellow from paper marigolds – the flower associated with Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead). Video effects show the shifting colours of the New Mexico sky above, bathing the stage in a magical glow.

As Kenna, American actress Lena Hall is mesmerising. Clad in leather and cowboy boots, she's a bundle of contradictions: nonchalant but scared, spiky but kind, fiercely independent but desperate to reconnect with her bandmates. Hall's raspy voice and powerful belt make it easy to believe Kenna is a former rock goddess, and in the moments where her voice softens, the vulnerability in it is heart-wrenching.

> "There are certainly tears to be shed, but the whole experience is also life-affirming"

Hall is adept at comedy too, and she has sparky chemistry with Oliver Tompsett (another *& Juliet* alum) who plays Kenna's drummer ex-boyfriend Ramsey. Tompsett manages to make the character both goofy and a very credible romantic lead, with his 'I Drove All Night' proving an early comic highlight.

Making up the rest of the band are the very likeable Sian Reese-Williams and Noël Sullivan, whose characters are now married with five children and searching for their lost passion. Whenever the four members sing together, the harmonies and raw energy combine to make it obvious that Heartbreak Radio was something special.

The supporting cast is equally strong. Manuel Pacific is softly spoken but impactful as restaurant manager Oscar and his stripped-down rendition of 'Llorando', the Spanish-language version of 'Crying', is beautifully performed. Gabriela García is charming as his girlfriend Nicole (García is also cultural coordinator for the show), but both characters would benefit from more development.

Mostly, though, Read's book gives us relatable, fleshed-out people and smart dialogue that always sounds natural. *In Dreams* tackles tough themes with great sensitivity, and highlights the joy and hope to be found in Mexican traditions surrounding life and death. It shows us the importance of community, spirituality and chosen family, without ever becoming saccharine.

There are certainly tears to be shed in the second act, both onstage and in the audience, but the whole experience is also life-affirming and uplifting. *In Dreams* is headed for Toronto, presumably with its sights set on Broadway, but there'll be plenty of people dreaming of it returning to the UK in the future.

Laura Lott

Production credits

Cast Lena Hall, Oliver Tompsett, Sian Reese-Williams, Noël Sullivan, Manuel Pacific, Gabriela García, Alma Cuervo, Richard Trinder, Leon Craig *et al*
Direction Luke Sheppard
Musical direction Patrick Hurley
Musical supervision Catherine Jayes
Choreography Fabian Aloise
Set Arnulfo Maldonado
Lighting Howard Hudson
Sound Tom Marshall
Video George Reeve
Costumes Fay Fullerton

PHOTOGRAPHY: Pamela Raith

La Cage aux Folles

Jerry Herman music, lyrics
Harvey Fierstein book
Regent's Park Open Air Theatre 29 July – 23 September 2023
REVIEWED ON 11 AUGUST 2023

Billy Carter (Georges), Daniele Coombe (Mme Renaud), Debbie Kurup (Jacqueline) and Carl Mullaney (as Albin, and being Zaza, centre); the eye-catching Cagelles

It took two attempts to see the whole of Timothy Sheader's swansong at the Regent's Park Open Air Theatre after rain stopped play on opening night, but when a production turns out to be as hopeful and heartfelt as this one, a repeat visit is hardly something to complain about.

That is not to say that this interpretation of Jerry Herman and Harvey Fierstein's *La Cage aux Folles*, genuinely ground-breaking when it opened on Broadway 40 years ago, is all gloss and glam.

What makes this staging so striking is its authenticity, from the shabbiness of Georges and Albin's home/drag club in St Tropez (obvious from the moment you catch a glimpse of Colin Richmond's set) to the truly diverse nature of the talented line-up of Cagelles, each given the freedom to be themselves rather than just another face in the ensemble.

There's an energy in the space as the drag queens strut down the aisles for the opening number 'We Are What We Are', a feeling that at La Cage difference is celebrated not judged. And none of this is presented in a worthy fashion; it's all wrapped up in the joy of Sheader's truthful storytelling and Stephen Mear's quite glorious choreography, performed with such vitality by Zaza (Albin's drag persona) and the La Cage performers.

In fact, it's this combination that gets to the heart of why this piece continues to have such an impact. Yes, the nightclub numbers are hugely entertaining, but alongside all the fun and frolics there is a deeply moving story of love, family and acceptance.

This is particularly present in the central relationship of Georges and Albin, roles played by Billy Carter and Carl Mullaney with honesty and passion. You never doubt their love for each other. Carter's rendition of 'Song on the Sand', a reflection on when the couple first fell in love, is exquisite.

No wonder, then, that Georges struggles when his son John-Michel requests that Albin disappear for one night so that he can impress his fiancée Anne's extremely conservative parents. Albin may have been a true mother to him his whole life, but appearances are the priority on this occasion.

> "Alongside the fun and frolics there is a moving story of love, family, acceptance"

When Albin realises what is being asked of him and stops the nightclub's jolly antics to sing 'I Am What I Am', the audience senses the vulnerability and hurt, but a hidden strength too. It's powerful stuff.

This scenario, especially when Anne's prejudiced parents arrive for dinner, naturally creates some fun and farce (with the welcome additions of Debbie Kurup as restaurateur Jacqueline and the wonderful Shakeel Kimotho as the maid-not-butler). But Herman is really at his best when getting to the heart of the matter in 'Look Over There', Georges's plea to his son to see the hurt he's inflicting on Albin, and the moving reprise when John-Michel realises the great mistake he has made.

Musical Theatre is most successful when all the creative collaborators are on the same page, and that is very much the case here: Richmond's set design switches from romantic to raunchy to religious; Howard Hudson's uplifting lighting is quite something to behold as the night draws in; and Ryan Dawson Laight's sensational costumes – all bows, frills, polka dots, corsets, tutus, furry bras, Elvis wigs, wheels (!), and illuminations – are a delight. It's also a joy to hear the band led by MD Ben van Tienen bring such clarity and exuberance to Herman's score (credit to sound designer Nick Lidster and orchestrator/arranger Jason Carr too).

La Cage is often complimented for the razor-sharp wit of Fierstein's book, the memorable anthemic tunes from Herman, and the eye-catching drag queens – and all of those elements are here. But most important of all is the message that if a life is lived with kindness, care and tolerance, then no one has the right to respond to that with prejudice and hate.

Sadly, in light of recent homophobic and transphobic hate crimes, this show is as relevant now as it ever was.

Lisa Martland

Production credits

Cast Jak Allen-Anderson, Craig Armstrong, Billy Carter, Ben Culleton, Jordan Lee Davies, Julie Jupp, Shakeel Kimotho, Debbie Kurup, George Lynham, Carl Mullaney, Sophie Pourret *et al*
Direction Tim Sheader
Musical direction Ben van Tienen
Orchestrations Jason Carr
Choreography Stephen Mear
Set Colin Richmond
Lighting Howard Hudson
Sound Nick Lidster for Autograph
Costumes Ryan Dawson Laight

PHOTOGRAPHY: Johan Persson / Mark Senior

The Little Big Things

Nick Butcher music, lyrics **Tom Ling** lyrics
Joe White book (based on the memoir by **Henry Fraser**)
@sohoplace 2 September – 25 November 2023
REVIEWED ON 14 SEPTEMBER 2023

Ed Larkin and Jonny Amies explore the life of Henry Fraser, who suffers a spinal injury at 17; Linzi Hateley as Fran; Amy Trigg (centre left, as Agnes) and company

Launching a brand new musical in the West End that's not based on an existing film property isn't the done thing. For every person who wants this sector to be more bold and adventurous, it always seems there are loads of people who say that it can't be.

Others placing limitations on you is one of the challenges faced by people with disabilities, as physiotherapist Agnes (Amy Trigg) points out in *The Little Big Things* (she calls such people "bloody 'can't's"). An imaginative retelling of the life story of artist Henry Fraser, who broke his spine in a diving accident while on holiday as a 17-year-old, this new British musical chronicles how Henry's injury was life-changing not only for him but for his entire family.

Joe White's book centres around two versions of Henry: Jonny Amies's diffident teenager, the quietest of four rugby-obsessed brothers, and Ed Larkin as the older, wheelchair-using young man. Together, the pair explore Henry's life before and after the accident. The duality of their roles prompts an exploration of Henry's psyche in a way a single performer could not, as the pair wrestle with whether or not to even remember the accident itself.

Nick Butcher's songs, with lyrics by Butcher and Tom Ling, have a bright, poppy attitude to them, with the same sense of verve and propulsive joy that can be found in the works of Pasek and Paul. Even in the darkest moments – particularly with Linzi Hateley (as Fran, Henry's mother) expressing torment as she waits for news of her boy in 'One to Seventeen' – the score has a sense of the love and affection that the close-knit family members have for each other.

That spreads to the characters around Henry and his folks as well, especially Trigg's brilliantly forthright physio. This is a show that perfectly blends hilarity with deep-rooted emotion, such that the simple act of Dom holding Henry's hand – a rare display of quiet affection from his younger and least-reserved brother, who is normally a typically gregarious teen – is one of the more powerful moments in an evening packed with sentiment.

> "It's a reflection of Henry: undaunted, funny, kind, inspirational without being patronising"

The stresses placed upon the Fraser family are never shied away from, most notably the fractures between Hateley's Fran and Alasdair Harvey as Henry's father, Andrew. The sense of guilt and shame experienced by Henry's older brothers – who took Henry on holiday, and so feel responsible for what happened – is also addressed. Indeed, at times the musical threatens to concentrate on all these supporting characters rather than on Henry himself.

But Henry is always there, and Larkin and Amies grow in prominence. The turning point in their journey comes with some wire work, Amies flying above the stage as he recreates the dive that caused him to crash into the seabed. That act of remembrance of the event unlocks something in Henry and, guided by Trigg, he begins to move forward.

The art-loving Henry takes to painting with an iPad app and a custom stylus he can hold in his mouth. And while Act Two sees some of the real Henry's remarkable works descend from the rafters, art and painting is present throughout on the stage. The floor, a huge grid of LEDs, bursts into colours reflecting the characters' moods – optimistic reds and yellows clouded by the blues and blacks of depression, or vice versa.

Any written summary of *The Little Big Things* can make it sound dry, earnest, worthy. It also may seem as if it's another in an all-too-long line of treating disabled people who have overcome adversity as pitiable heroes, congratulated for their bravery in belittling ways. It is none of these, and indeed gently mocks such simplistic and demeaning portrayals.

Instead, it's a reflection of Henry Fraser: undaunted, funny, kind, unflinching, inspirational without ever being patronising. And if anybody suggests that the West End cannot produce original, groundbreaking, transformational musicals that are as fun to watch as they are moving to experience – well then, they're just "bloody 'can't's".

Scott Matthewman

Production credits

Cast Jonny Amies, Jordan Benjamin, Jamie Chatterton, Alasdair Harvey, Linzi Hateley, Ed Larkin, Gracie McGonigal, Tom Oliver, Malinda Parris, Cleve September, Amy Trigg *et al*
Direction Luke Sheppard
Musical direction Laura Bangay
Choreography Mark Smith
Set Colin Richmond
Costumes Fay Fullerton
Lighting Howard Hudson
Sound Paul Gatehouse
Video Luke Halls

PHOTOGRAPHY: Pamela Raith

The Lord of the Rings

AR Rahman, Värttinä, Christopher Nightingale music
Shaun McKenna, Matthew Warchus lyrics, book
The Watermill Theatre, Newbury 25 July – 15 October 2023
REVIEWED ON 6 AUGUST (MATINEE) 2023

Filled with magic: Louis Maskell as Frodo with Matthew Bugg playing Gollum and Nuwan Hugh Perera as Sam; members of The Lord of the Rings company

It may have recently been stripped of its Arts Council England funding totalling around £450,000 a year, but The Watermill Theatre has come back fighting following that devastating blow, and its latest production, a musical retelling of JRR Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, is testament to its determination and might.

In its boldest production to date, The Watermill has achieved the remarkable in taking a mammoth musical first seen in the UK in 2007 at the Theatre Royal Drury Lane – remembered primarily for its overblown production values and eye-watering £12.5 million budget – and making the show its own in a scaled-down, intimate production that exposes the musical's heart to maximum potential. It's a beautifully directed piece of theatre that leaves you open-mouthed at what this small venue has achieved on a fraction of the budget that West End musicals have to play with.

That's not to say Paul Hart's production loses any of the epicness required by the story – famously told over three films by Peter Jackson but condensed here to just over three hours. On the tiny stage, designer Simon Kenny makes use of a small revolve, a platform on which actors are raised and lowered, and an ever-watching eye seemingly carved into the wooden backdrop that observes both the cast and the audience, constantly changing colour and sometimes used to reveal characters. Add to that an impressive use of projections by George Reeve, and what you get is an incredible production that continuously wows and surprises.

If it is visually stunning, musically it is breathtaking, thanks largely to the 20-strong cast of actors, many of whom play instruments. They effortlessly and seamlessly tie the story together with their playing, bringing out the beautiful harmonies of the score, written by AR Rahman, Värttinä and Christopher Nightingale. The numbers include many that are folk-infused, such as the gorgeous 'Lothlórien' and 'The Song of Hope'. The latter is beautifully performed by Aoife O'Dea as Arwen, who also plays the harp. The moments where the cast come together to sing as an ensemble, such as the rousing 'Star of Eärendil', are real highlights – the music and voices blending perfectly. Special mention must also go to Sioned Saunders, the show's onstage musical director, who not only plays five instruments but on the performance I saw also stepped in last minute to cover the role of Galadriel. She was a wonder to behold as she performed in one scene before jumping behind the piano to conduct another.

> "A scaled-down production that exposes the musical's heart to maximum potential"

Saunders is just one of the many excellent performers in this production, which delivers fine turns from Louis Maskell as Frodo, and Nuwan Hugh Perera as Sam, his loveable and humorous sidekick. Matthew Bugg, as Gollum, is everything you want him to be – vocally and physically. His first appearance finds him at the back of the auditorium, on the upper level, before he crawls towards the stage, clambering over beams and in between audience members, suitably creepy – lithe and insect-like.

This production is billed as immersive, and on most performances will begin outdoors, with the celebration of Bilbo's 'eleventyfirst' birthday, before moving inside to continue the story of Frodo and his mission to destroy a magic ring that has dark forces attached to it. Rain prevented this on the performance I saw, but it was still immersive, with actors spread throughout the theatre at various points, including a suitably eerie use of puppet horse heads to depict the Black Riders who stalk through the audience in search of their prey.

In fact, there are plenty of awesome moments, not least when a giant puppet spider emerges from the depths of the stage, filling the space, its huge spindly legs creepily advancing on the audience. Rory Beaton's excellent lighting helps set the mood for this and every other scene.

Elsewhere, Anjali Mehra's impressive choreography cleverly allows the performers to fill the small stage without it ever feeling cluttered or overcrowded. A highlight is when the hobbits find themselves in the Prancing Pony inn, where they dance and play instruments as they perform the brilliantly catchy 'The Cat and the Moon' number, to exhilarating effect.

This is a terrific production, filled with magic, as charming as it is entertaining. It's destined to have a longer life, and is a show that everyone – particularly those in charge of arts funding – should see and savour.

Matthew Hemley

Production credits

Cast Folarin Akinmade, Matthew Bugg, Geraint Downing, Peter Dukes, Amelia Gabriel, Tom Giles, Charlotte Grayson, Nuwan Hugh Perera, Bridget Lappin, Georgia Louise, Peter Marinker, Louis Maskell, Aoife O'Dea, John O'Mahony, Yazdan Qafouri, Sioned Saunders, Aaron Sidwell *et al*
Direction Paul Hart
Musical supervision, orchestrations Mark Aspinall
Choreography Anjali Mehra
Set, costumes Simon Kenny
Lighting Rory Beaton
Sound Adam Fisher
Projections George Reeve
Puppets Charlie Tymms

PHOTOGRAPHY: Pamela Raith

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Next to Normal

Tom Kitt music **Brian Yorkey** lyrics, book
Donmar Warehouse, London 14 August – 7 October 2023
REVIEWED ON 22 AUGUST 2023

Collision: Jamie Parker and Jack Wolfe; Caissie Levy's Diana is surrounded by Eleanor Worthington-Cox, Parker, Trevor Dion Nicholas, Jack Ofrecio and Wolfe

The sound of nerves being scraped raw is emanating from the Donmar Warehouse, where the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Next to Normal* is finally having its British debut, more than 14 years after its Broadway opening garnered three Tony Awards.

Was it worth the wait? Very much so, not least as served up in the ever-empathic hands of the Donmar's artistic director, Michael Longhurst, who has form when it comes to reclaiming contemporary Broadway musicals afresh: his revival of *Caroline, or Change* was warmly received on both sides of the Atlantic. (Longhurst steps down from this position next year.)

The Broadway company of that production featured the notable actress-singer Caissie Levy in a supporting role, so Longhurst presumably knew what he was getting when he hired Levy to cross the ocean to lead the Anglo-American cast of *Next to Normal*. Levy, Broadway's original Elsa in *Frozen*, comes to *Next to Normal* from the splendid Broadway ensemble of *Leopoldstadt* and was previously seen on the London stage when the Diane Paulus-directed revival of *Hair* jumped the pond in 2010.

And she turns out to be an inspired choice for the part of the suburban mum in psychic freefall whose mental disorder is searingly dramatised across the 37 (!) songs listed in the programme.

The pop-rock score by Tom Kitt (music) and Brian Yorkey (book and lyrics) is itself reason to cheer the musical's belated emergence, its naked appeal to the emotions having already landed the show a devoted following – not least among many younger theatregoers drawn to its vibrant immediacy.

On the face of it, Levy's sunny-natured Diana is entirely in control. It's 'Just Another Day', or so the opening song tells us, but we're not far along before we see a bipolar woman beset by delusion alongside an unshakable grief, the specific nature of which is perhaps best left unrevealed.

> "Actress Caissie Levy is an inspired choice for the part of the mum in psychic freefall"

Suffice to say that all is not what it seems with a family that includes a kind if increasingly abject husband Dan (Jamie Parker, in his second musical in a row following the superb *Benjamin Button* at Southwark Playhouse) and two children.

Natalie (Eleanor Worthington-Cox) has embarked on a relationship of her own whose trajectory risks a collision course with the frayed rapport of her parents and the antic Gabe, whom Jack Wolfe plays with a galvanic charm that may well do for this budding young talent what the same part did in New York for Aaron Tveit. Trevor Dion Nicholas, another Broadway alum, ably completes the cast as two contrasting medics.

Chloe Lamford's sliding set has a deliberately antiseptic look that shows in vivid relief the literal and figurative mess that this household will come to know, and the (now and again) concealed nature of the musicians on the level above allows a visual correlative of the veils of despair that threaten to devour Diana and her family whole.

Levy is a warmer, more engaging presence than the ferocious Alice Ripley, who won a Tony for the part and reprised it for an immersive production that played Barcelona last year. If Levy's supple voice sometimes swallows the odd word, she couples the attack needed for the part with sudden bursts of frailty that catch at the heart, and Jamie Parker matches her every step of the way as a loving husband who soon finds himself at a loss as to how to help.

The show comes to rest with a song called 'Light'. The number opts not for sentimental uplift but for the only option available, which is to try however best one can to face another day – just as this rending musical has itself managed here, to ravishing effect.

Matt Wolf

Production credits

Cast Caissie Levy, Jamie Parker, Jack Wolfe, Eleanor Worthington-Cox, Trevor Dion Nicholas, Jack Ofrecio
Direction Michael Longhurst
Musical direction Nick Barstow
Musical supervision Nigel Lilley
Orchestrations Michael Starobin, Tom Kitt
Movement, choreography Ann Yee
Set, costumes Chloe Lamford
Lighting Lee Curran
Sound Tony Gayle
Video Tal Rosner

PHOTOGRAPHY: Marc Brenner

Rock Follies

Andy Mackay, Howard Schuman music, lyrics
Chloë Moss book, based on TV series by **Howard Schuman**
Chichester Festival Theatre 24 July - 26 August 2023
REVIEWED ON 23 AUGUST 2023

A wonderfully low-tech set creates the nostalgic vibe with Sebastien Torkia as Stevie and Zizi Strallen, Angela Marie Hurst and Carly Bawden playing the 'Little Ladies'

There can't be many better teams to make a musical. Zizi Strallen, Carly Bawden and Angela Marie Hurst leading the cast, Vicki Mortimer and Paule Constable on the design team, and Dominic Cooke at the helm, whose National Theatre revival of non-rock *Follies* remains one of the best shows I've ever seen.

Unfortunately, his production of *Rock Follies* comes nowhere near that high watermark. Adapted from Howard Schuman's 1970s TV series by Chloë Moss, in which three actresses decide to form a rock band, there's so much to like about it – performances, staging, costumes, lighting, band – but it's all held together by a wobbly book. Though overstuffed with 12 episodes of plot, it never fully develops its characters, and the dialogue has the patronising tone of an old kids' TV programme (but with more swearing).

There's Dee, originally Julie Covington, here a phenomenal Angela Marie Hurst whose voice seems to have no bounds. Sick of her commune and her life as a put-upon chorine, she sets up the ironically named band Little Ladies with Carly Bawden's Anna, Cambridge-educated and middle class (originally Charlotte Cornwell), and Q – Zizi Strallen taking the baton from Rula Lenska – who had been making money from adult films.

It's the usual story of the ups and downs of the music business: the graft, the tussles over image, overbearing management, the initial success and the inevitable downward spiral.

And that's part of the problem: where those storylines might have seemed raw and revolutionary almost 50 years ago, they've become so ingrained now that they come close to parody.

The original show was inspired by the scrappiness of fringe theatre, an atmosphere which designer Mortimer recreates with her wonderfully low-tech set.

There's a spangly curtain on a skeletal stage, and the rest is made up of flight cases that are wheeled on and off to conjure up recording studios, dressing rooms, pubs.

> "Harmonies are tight, their voices different but often coming together magnificently"

The songs are the originals written by Roxy Music's Andy Mackay for the TV show, and it's a strange collection. Some – like 'Sugar Mountain' – provide peppy musical punches throughout the show and give the main trio the chance to demonstrate how brilliant they are. Harmonies are tight, their individual voices texturally different but coming together magnificently.

Other songs (and there are plenty of them) are less interesting, and sometimes downright odd; it might be the only time you'll hear the word 'Dorking' in a rock song.

Strong support comes from Samuel Barnett as the band's initial manager Harry, and Tamsin Carroll puts in a particularly memorable performance as Kitty, the fearsome manager who decides to take on the band. Her straight face and stride make her one of the strongest characters in the show, as she finely tunes the switch from her firmness being for the benefit of the band to slowly working against them.

But amid all those wondrous turns, Moss's adaptation remains an insurmountable problem. It's a *Rock Follies* that, despite its dynamism, is stuck in the past. Yes, there are updates, notably in its racial politics, but it mostly looks and sounds like a period piece and loses the sense of radicalism it once had.

On top of that, the three main characters are given neat, terse story arcs which are laughably simple. Strallen's chain-smoking Q dithers when it comes to band decisions, then in the last few minutes decides not to sit on the fence anymore. Strait-laced Anna gets tossed a bag of cocaine towards the beginning, then her sole character trait is 'drug and alcohol addict' until Kitty books her into rehab. 'Not for me, thanks,' she says when offered a drink in the next scene. Hooray, she's cured.

For fans of the show or survivors of the '70s, it's a semi-satisfying nostalgia trip. But wigs and flares only go so far – all that talent, doing its best to stand tall on such rocky foundations.

Tim Bano

Production credits

Cast Zizi Strallen, Carly Bawden, Angela Marie Hurst, Samuel Barnett, Collette Guitart, Tamsin Carroll, Stephenson Ardern-Sodje, Sebastien Torkia *et al*
Direction Dominic Cooke
Musical direction Toby Higgins
Musical supervision Nigel Lilley
Choreography Carrie-Anne Ingrouille
Set Vicki Mortimer
Lighting Paule Constable
Sound Ian Dickinson
Costumes Kinnetia Isidore

PHOTOGRAPHY: Johan Persson

Miss Saigon

Claude-Michel Schönberg music **Richard Maltby Jnr, Alain Boublil** lyrics **Michael Mahler** additional lyrics
Crucible Theatre, Sheffield 8 July – 19 August 2023
REVIEWED ON 13 JULY 2023

Born again? Joanna Ampil as a gender-swapped version of the Engineer; Jessica Lee's steely Kim; and the company of the Crucible's new Miss Saigon in action

The Crucible's revival of *Miss Saigon* is the show's first regional reinvention, and a big risk for the theatre. Claude-Michel Schönberg, Alain Boublil and Richard Maltby Jr's musical has long attracted criticism for its portrayal of women and Vietnamese people, and the Crucible's decision to programme it prompted serious controversy. However, directors Robert Hastie and Anthony Lau promised a bold reinvention.

Their changes are indeed substantial – although the central narrative (itself lifted from *Madama Butterfly*) remains. Set during the Vietnam War and its aftermath, local sex worker Kim (Jessica Lee) and American GI Chris (Christian Maynard) fall in love but are separated when Chris is evacuated. He later marries Ellen (Shanay Holmes), while Kim has a son, Tam, for whom she dreams of a better life.

To counteract the musical's reputation as misogynist, female characters are given more agency. The most inspired change is casting Joanna Ampil (a former Kim) as bar owner/pimp the Engineer. She reinvents the role as an animal-print-clad diva: strong, funny, sympathetic, and the character the audience connects with the most.

The women are also costumed differently to some of the hyper-sexualised presentations of the past. Kim is given a new, welcome steeliness and depth by Lee – although it's impossible to entirely obscure the fact that she's written more as a male ideal of a woman than a truly believable character.

Given changes have been made to lyrics throughout, it's disappointing that some clunky lines remain. The Engineer calling Kim a 'bitch' feels out of character, while the lyrics in 'The Confrontation' ('it's like she went insane', 'is it her now or me?') don't feel true to the nuanced, empathetic understanding of sisterhood that Holmes brings to Ellen.

To address the argument that *Miss Saigon* falls into white saviour tropes and decentres the Asian experience, the show employs many creatives of colour, including an Asian co-director. Only one lead role is played by a white actor, Shane O'Riordan's John. His campaigning for Vietnamese children is framed as the desperate act of a haunted man trying to atone for his country's sins – and his own.

> "Joanna Ampil, a former Kim, reinvents the Engineer as a strong, animal-print-clad diva"

Chris and Ellen are now a Black couple, traumatised by their experiences. The USA remains a place of hope for some Vietnamese characters, but this is tempered with cynicism towards the country's actions ('The American Dream' is turned into a 'Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend'-inspired satire of consumerism).

Instead of the show's original helicopter and rising sun, this production's branding uses a defiant image of its two female leads, neon-lit against the concrete-effect set. Designer Ben Stones was inspired by the architecture of Saigon and its Corbusier-influenced brutalism. This backdrop is supplemented by a rotating floor and a stark metal staircase, while the only other major piece of set dressing is a large concrete-effect platform which becomes, variously, a table, bar and boat.

Jessica Hung Han Yun's lighting brings everything together, and video animations from Andrzej Goulding aid transitions between scenes. The orchestration is strong, albeit loud. In songs where two or more performers sing different lines at once, it can be hard to distinguish the words. Choreography (by Jade Hackett) is dynamic with a balance between bombastic group numbers and more intimate pieces. The famous 'helicopter scene' remains sensational.

So, what to make of this revival overall? Obviously the plot remains, and for some this alone may be too problematic. I was disappointed that the theatre didn't address the controversy more. They could have scheduled content written by East Asian women alongside the run, featured a discussion with the directors about their decisions, or had commentary from East Asian scholars or creatives.

Technically, this production is excellent – an incredible cast, beautiful visuals, powerful music. While I think the reinvention could have been even bolder, those changes they have made feel essential. Any future versions of the show should build on these new foundations.

Ruth Deller

Production credits

Cast Joanna Ampil, Jessica Lee, Christian Maynard, Shanay Holmes, Aynrand Ferrer, Shane O'Riordan, Ethan Le Phong, Desmonda Cathabel *et al*
Direction Robert Hastie, Anthony Lau
Musical direction Chris Poon
Orchestrations William David Brohn
Set, costumes Ben Stones
Choreography Jade Hackett
Lighting Jessica Hung Han Yun
Sound Mike Walker
Video, animation Andrzej Goulding

PHOTOGRAPHY: Johan Persson

The Sound of Music

Richard Rodgers music **Oscar Hammerstein II** lyrics
Howard Lindsay, Russel Crouse book
Chichester Festival Theatre 10 July – 3 September 2023
REVIEWED ON 17 JULY 2023

The Captain (Edward Harrison, left) is surprised to hear music back in his home, sung by his children and taught by governess Maria (Gina Beck, centre and right)

The way I see it is this: every new production of this 1959 Rodgers and Hammerstein favourite has two very different mountains to climb. The first, with benign gradient and myriad beautiful vistas, is made up of the near-universal fondness for this family-celebrating, Nazi-defying work, with its sweeping songs and storyline. Audiences, almost certainly filled with nostalgic memories of Julie Andrews as that delightfully rogue nun Maria, want to be made to laugh, swoon and cry all over again. Their hopeful hearts are ripe for easy plucking.

Yet the second mountain is a markedly contrasting proposition, steep and twisty and asking awkward questions of all who dare to venture onto it. What, it demands of each new director, have you possibly got to add to a legend such as me? Adam Penford cannot provide a definitive answer to this, but he can say with confidence that he has found a delightful Maria to head his new production.

Gina Beck's voice is as sweet and pure as fresh edelweiss and she strikes the ideal balance between mischievous playfulness and innocent naughtiness. The hearts, minds and vocal cords of the von Trapp family will never be the same again after she is sent from the nunnery by sternly commanding Mother Abbess (opera singer Janis Kelly in steely form) to look after the gaggle of winsomely motherless nippers. Captain Georg von Trapp (Edward Harrison) himself, who summons members of his family via a whistle he wears on a chain around his neck, is helpless to resist this onslaught of charm.

The sheer power and charisma of Beck's performance paper over some cracks that are, upon closer inspection, apparent from the start. Robert Jones's odd plastic set of would-be alpine ridges is an ugly waste of an opportunity and does little to suggest either natural grandeur or a family home. There is no possibility that the climactic escape can be made in this way as per the film, and to Penford's credit he turns this would-be dilemma into an opportunity, gently moulding the action to the internal geography of the sweeping Festival Theatre.

The richly ominous post-Anschluss final scene sees the family assembled for a concert performance at the Salzburg Festival, where their auditorium – our auditorium – is suddenly full of Nazi insignia and uniformed officers of the Third Reich. The von Trapps peel off individually to exit the stage and escape via the snaking stairs underneath, reemerging for a nervy procession up the central aisle to finish. It is a visceral reminder that, behind all the jollity, the minatory jackboots of historical veracity march ever closer.

> "Gina Beck is a delightful Maria: her voice is as sweet and pure as fresh edelweiss"

Prior to this momentous finale, Penford's production cruises comfortably without ever fully stretching itself. The children, played by two six-strong teams of performers linked by the constant presence of Lauren Conroy's appealing Liesl, are cuteness personified, especially when Maria gets to work on turning old curtains into matching outfits. 'So Long, Farewell' is a comedy of clockwork-precise choreography and 'Do-Re-Mi' is as appealing-cum-cloying as ever.

The secondary characters pale in comparison, and Harrison especially has a tough time trying to compete with Beck's charm. Howard Lindsay and Russel Crouse's book is creaking with age now and too often there comes a dispiriting sense that the lumpen dialogue is merely there to give the cast a chance to catch their breath between songs. That infuriatingly jaunty yodelling classic 'The Lonely Goatherd' remains, perhaps perversely, my favourite number, although the stark simplicity of 'Edelweiss', with its plaintive celebration of a soon-to-be-lost homeland, is as emotive as ever.

Chichester has rightly become celebrated in the world of Musical Theatre for its summer show; last year's offering, *Crazy for You*, has recently transferred to the West End, following the accomplished likes of *South Pacific* and *Half a Sixpence*. *The Sound of Music* is an undisputed classic musical, the last fruits of Rodgers and Hammerstein's genre-defining and decades-spanning collaboration, but this is not a classic production. Yet it is amply entertaining – and that is almost certainly enough.

Fiona Mountford

Production credits

Cast Gina Beck, Edward Harrison, Janis Kelly, Ako Mitchell, Emma Williams, Lauren Conroy, Dylan Mason, Minal Patel, Tony Stansfield, Annabelle Williams *et al*
Direction Adam Penford
Musical direction Matt Samer
Musical supervision Gareth Valentine
Original orchestrations Robert Russell Bennett
Orchestral adaptation Larry Blank, Mark Cumberland
Choreography Lizzi Gee
Set Robert Jones
Lighting Johanna Town
Sound Paul Groothuis
Costumes Poppy Hall
Video Hayley Egan

PHOTOGRAPHY: Manuel Harlan

Back to the Future

Bob Gale book **Alan Silvestri, Glen Ballard** music, lyrics
Winter Garden Theatre, New York 30 June 2023 – ongoing
REVIEWED ON 28 JULY 2023

US LIVE SHOWS

Marty McFly (Casey Likes, centre and right) is aided in his time-travelling by scientist Doc Brown (Roger Bart, left), and, of course, that legendary DeLorean (centre)

The best screen-to-stage musicals have fallen into two categories: shows based on old classics (*Sunset Boulevard*) or obscure indies (*The Band's Visit*), where the story is less familiar to most audiences; and shows sprung from recent hits (*The Lion King*) that find fresh ways to adapt the material for a brand-new medium – ideally making song a central element of the storytelling. Lately, though, many movie-based musicals seem less like creative endeavours than brand extensions.

Back to the Future, arriving on Broadway after an Olivier-winning London debut, delivers a glossy but hollow show with a mostly forgettable score by Alan Silvestri and Glen Ballard (who co-wrote the music for the 2011 clunker *Ghost: The Musical*). Yes, the tunes include 1950s classics like 'Earth Angel' and 'Johnny B Goode' as well as the 1980s anthem 'The Power of Love' from the film's soundtrack. But the new songs are mostly serviceable pastiches of '50s pop, occasionally spiked with a refreshing 21st-century sensibility that rhymes 'malarkey' with 'patriarchy'.

There are some nods to the musical format. Roger Bart (*The Producers*), who ratchets up Doc Brown's mad-scientist eccentricity, observes that a chorus of showgirls appears whenever he breaks into song. Why he's singing, though, remains a puzzlement. And Casey Likes, a survivor of Broadway's *Almost Famous* musical, boasts an appealing voice and a youthful energy as the teenage time-traveller Marty McFly – yet he's mostly slack-jawed during the first act, as stumped as we are by the muddled version of a character made famous by Michael J Fox.

Other leads –such as Hugh Coles as Marty's wimpy dad, Liana Hunt as his flirty mom, and Nathaniel Hackmann as the one-dimensional bully Biff – seem content with reducing their roles to sitcommy cartoons.

One trouble is that there's a bigger time gap between now and the 1985 film than there was between the 1985 setting and the 1955 timeframe where Marty thrusts himself into a love triangle with his high school-age parents – a concept that seemed skeevy even at the time. One Gen X friend told me that when he recently showed the film to his kids, they were completely confused because pre-smartphone 1985 seemed just as dated as the '50s era. Even the future-set *Back to the Future 2* took place in… 2015.

> "In the jaw-dropping second-act climax, the DeLorean defies all laws of physics"

Instead of reworking the material to allow a present-day Marty to head back to the '80s, book writer Bob Gale slavishly cribs from his original screenplay (with director Robert Zemeckis, a co-creator here), making only modest updates. (Mercifully, the film's Middle Eastern terrorists have been jettisoned.) While one '50s number extols the virtues of cigarettes and leaded gas, you wish that the show would better exploit the discrepancies between then and now. Chris Bailey's choreography, another exercise in period pastiche, is also a missed opportunity.

Where director John Rando succeeds, and succeeds spectacularly, is in both pacing and stagecraft. Seldom has a Broadway show looked and felt more like a film. Tim Hatley's eye-popping sets shift seamlessly from Doc Brown's crowded workshop to a vintage pastel-tinted diner to the clocktower where Brown struggles to erect a lightning-capturing contraption in the nick of time. Hatley's costumes lean heavily on the film's signature looks, with nods to the bobby-sock-era '50s and the colour-blocked '80s for the chorus.

But the show's big star is the time-travelling DeLorean, which zips suddenly onstage and then, coupled with Finn Ross's video design and Chris Fisher's illusions, appears to race along small-town streets at engine-revving speeds. In the jaw-dropping second-act climax, the car defies all apparent laws of physics (and gravity) by hovering over the front rows of the stalls.

But do theatre audiences really want to see a live-action film recreated on stage, even one that blows bubbles into the auditorium during the '50s high school dance? In the end, Marty and Doc Brown are just no match for the technical wizardry on display all around them. And you won't exit the theatre humming the purr of a DeLorean engine.

Thom Geier

Production credits

Cast Roger Bart, Casey Likes, Hugh Coles, Nathaniel Hackmann, Liana Hunt, Jelani Remy *et al*
Direction John Rando
Choreography Chris Bailey
Music direction Ted Arthur
Music supervision Nick Finlow
Orchestrations Ethan Popp, Bryan Crook
Set, costumes Tim Hatley
Lighting Tim Lutkin, Hugh Vanstone
Sound Gareth Owen
Video Finn Ross
Illusions Chris Fisher

PHOTOGRAPHY: Matthew Murphy and Evan Zimmerman

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Here Lies Love & Hippest Trip

Here Lies Love

David Byrne concept, music, lyrics **Fatboy Slim** music
Tom Gandey, José Luis Pardo additional music
Broadway Theatre, New York 17 June 2023 – 7 January 2024
REVIEWED ON 16 JULY 2023

Hippest Trip – The Soul Train Musical

Various artists music, lyrics
Dominique Morisseau book
American Conservatory Theatre, San Francisco 27 August – 8 October 2023
REVIEWED ON 6 SEPTEMBER 2023

Go-for-broke performances: Conrad Ricamora as Ninoy Aquino; Jose Llana as Ferdinand Marcos; and Arielle Jacobs's Imelda Marcos with ensemble members

American audiences on opposite coasts are currently being treated to two very different musicals recounting sociopolitical events of the late 20th century among communities of colour. Both are cast entirely from the communities they depict, thus giving them agency in telling their own stories, and both employ social dance to illuminate underlying themes. That one show is decidedly more successful than the other probably speaks to the benefit of its longer gestation period.

When I first saw *Here Lies Love* during its well-received 2013 Off-Broadway run, its exuberance overwhelmed its darker themes in a way that ultimately made an unambiguous heroine out of its flawed central character, Imelda Marcos. I was also dubious about whether its immersive disco staging could work in a larger, proscenium house.

I'm only too happy to report that in its reincarnation at the Broadway Theatre, the show finally feels like everything it was meant to be. It is a felicitous coincidence that it's playing across the street from Studio 54, which is one of the show's locales. And by removing Imelda's reprise of the infectious title song at the end, the show no longer gives her the final word.

Here Lies Love is a unique mash-up of dance floor rave-up, Filipino cultural celebration and cautionary true tale. Almost entirely sung through, it tells the story of Imelda's rise from hardscrabble childhood to beauty queen girlfriend of politico Ninoy Aquino to glamorous wife of dictator Ferdinand Marcos and their eventual comeuppance at the hands of the People Power Revolution. The score by David Byrne and Fatboy Slim hearkens back to classic Talking Heads with bass-driven polyrhythms and incantatory spoken lines.

The show feels like an event from the moment you enter the fuchsia-lit lobby that recalls a trendy dance club circa 1980. The Broadway Theatre has been transformed into a disco at stage level with theatre seating in the mezzanine, the same layout as Studio 54 in its heyday. If you opt, as I did, for a dance floor ticket, you'll find yourself enveloped in a fever dream of flashing lights, pounding music, propulsive choreography, video montages, newspaper headlines and go-for-broke performances.

> "The theatre has been transformed into a disco: you're enveloped in a fever dream"

The all-Filipino cast may be the hardest-working ensemble on Broadway, dancing one high-energy number after another while nailing crystal-clear harmonies as back-up for lead vocalists who may be 50 feet away. Meanwhile, Alex Timbers's hyperkinetic staging keeps the show constantly in motion. One minute Conrad Ricamora's Aquino was singing and dancing so close I could literally reach out and touch him, the next he was darting to the top of the theatre. That swift transition from close-up to distance shot is something normally only achievable in film, and is breathtaking to experience live onstage.

The kaleidoscopic video and still projections are so enmeshed with the peripatetic set that it's impossible to separate out the contributions of scenic designer David Korins from projection designer Peter Nigrini. Justin Townsend's lighting is a crazy quilt of shifting patterns that constantly reorients perspective. Clint Ramos's vibrant costumes are culturally authentic and Annie-B Parson's choreography is a frothy mélange of '70s-era disco moves, line dance and folk dance that forms the pulsating heart of the show.

Ricamora is utterly mesmerising as Aquino, a fireball of energy who matures from boy band heartthrob to righteous political opposition leader. Jose Llana as Ferdinand matches him every step of the way, progressing from brash political huckster to slimy ageing dictator, making Marcos consistently compelling without glorifying him. Arielle Jacobs as Imelda sings spectacularly and creates a sweetly cunning younger characterisation, although I wish she had more gravitas in her final scenes.

The production's final ace is the ever-astonishing Lea Salonga in the cameo role of Aquino's mother. Salonga's laser beam intensity and deep well of feeling in her lament for her dead son, 'Just Ask the Flowers', bring the show to catharsis before it concludes with a haunting

Production credits – Here Lies Love

Cast Arielle Jacobs, Jose Llana, Conrad Ricamora, Lea Salonga, Melody Butiu, Moses Villarama *et al*
Direction Alex Timbers
Music direction J Oconer Navarro
Vocal arrangements Kimberly Grigsby, Justin Levine
Choreography Annie-B Parson
Set David Korins
Lighting Justin Townsend
Sound ML Dogg, Cody Spencer
Costumes Clint Ramos
Projections Peter Nigrini

PHOTOGRAPHY: Billy Bustamante, Matthew Murphy and Evan Zimmerman / Kevin Berne & Alessandra Mello

Despite lack of narrative drive, there's captivating singing and dancing to enjoy in Hippest Trip, thanks to a committed cast including Alain 'Hurrikane' Lauture (right)

paean to the People Power Revolution sung a cappella by the entire cast dressed in contemporary street clothes.

It's a profoundly moving ending, complicated by our knowledge that Marcos's son was recently elected president of the Philippines, a tacit reminder of just how fragile democracy is.

Meanwhile, on the West Coast, the Broadway-aimed *Hippest Trip – The Soul Train Musical* in its world premiere at San Francisco's American Conservatory Theatre is a musical somewhat at odds with itself.

Its considerable assets include a culturally resonant true story, a trove of tasty oldies, striking designs, committed performances and the most exciting choreography and fiercest dancing you could wish for.

The fly in the ointment is a central character who is neither likeable nor particularly interesting as conceived by eminent playwright Dominique Morisseau in her by-the-numbers book and directed by Kamilah Forbes in her lacklustre staging. This is a pity, since *Hippest Trip* is a story worth telling and that rare jukebox musical with a real reason for being. Back in 1970, Chicago newsman Don Cornelius noticed Black recording artists performing for largely white audiences on Dick Clark's *American Bandstand*. This spurred him to create the first TV show specifically for and by the Black community, with top R&B acts and local kids dancing in their finery.

That show, *Soul Train*, gained local traction before moving to Los Angeles where it became a national phenomenon, running for 35 years. It was a cultural touchstone for the Black community and something everyone else wanted to check out to stay current on music and fashion trends.

Unfortunately, there's little story left to tell once the TV show becomes a success midway through Act One, so we get scene after scene of Cornelius being disagreeable with colleagues and family members.

The singing and dancing are so captivating they carry the day for a while, but as the show goes on the lack of narrative drive saps its energy, not helped by the unwise decision to break up most numbers with interstitial dialogue, *à la* the bench scene in *Carousel*.

> "A trove of tasty oldies, striking designs and the fiercest dancing you could wish for"

The music, however, is a constant wonderment. The delightfully eclectic song selection centres on classic R&B while making room for the electronica of 'Funkytown' and syncopated brass of Burt Bacharach and Hal David's 'Walk On By'.

The ensemble cast takes the stage with an energy so explosive they threaten to blow the roof off the joint. Choreographer Camille A Brown's movement is always exhilarating, keeping her dancers low to the stage when they aren't flying across it, incorporating Black social dances like the Dap and the Bump. The one uninterrupted number her dancers are allotted, Bobby Brown's 'My Prerogative', is so intoxicating you wish the whole show could be like that.

Angela Birchett as Cornelius's first wife brings warmth and dignity to a role that gives her little to do. Amber Iman, in the larger role of production coordinator Pam Brown, has an innately beguiling stage presence and delivers the show's 11 o'clock number, 'Get Here', with soul and grace. Quentin Earl Darrington as Don Cornelius has a natural authority and stentorian baritone but is not wizard enough to make up for the limitations of his character.

Upon entering the theatre, you notice that scenic designer Jason Sherwood has encased the proscenium in a rectangle resembling the frame of an old-time TV set. Bursting from it are enormous swirls illuminated in a specific colour combo of mustard and maroon that screams 1970. The image is big and audacious, suggesting that 1970s funk is about to explode all over the theatre. Now that's the show I wanted to see.

Hopefully, if the creatives are given sufficient time to revamp the show and really let their imaginations run wild, they can transform *Hippest Trip* into the completely transporting experience it's meant to be.

Jim Munson

Production credits – Hippest Trip

Cast Quentin Earl Darrington, Amber Iman, Angela Birchett, Sidney DuPont, Kayla Davion, Mayte Natalio, Cameron Hah, Alain 'Hurrikane' Lauture *et al*
Direction Kamilah Forbes
Music direction Sean Kana
Music supervision, orchestrations Kenny Seymour
Choreography Camille A Brown
Set Jason Sherwood
Lighting Jen Schriever
Sound Jonathan Deans
Costumes Dede Ayite

Monsoon Wedding

Vishal Bhardwaj music **Masi Asare, Susan Birkenhead** lyrics
Arpita Mukherjee, Sabrina Dhawan book **Mira Nair** concept
St Ann's Warehouse, New York 6 May – 24 June 2023
REVIEWED ON 19 MAY 2023

Namit Das (centre) as the ambitious wedding planner; Deven Kolluri and Salena Qureshi portraying the central couple; Monsoon Wedding's passionate ensemble

Mira Nair's 2001 film *Monsoon Wedding* does not immediately suggest itself as a candidate for a stage musical adaptation. Nair, who got her start as a documentary filmmaker in the 1970s, brought a *vérité* approach to the sprawling story of far-flung relatives descending on a Delhi home for the traditional arranged marriage of a well-bred Hindu girl (played in this musical adaptation by Salena Qureshi) and a Princeton-educated Indian-American boy (Deven Kolluri).

In reconceiving her own movie for the stage, Nair provides some narrative structure to the material – even elevating a minor subplot about the ambitious lower-class wedding planner (Namit Das) and his pursuit of the family's maid (Anisha Nagarajan) into a more fleshed-out parallel love story that can justify a double wedding by the final curtain.

Arpita Mukherjee and Sabrina Dhawan's book packs in *a lot* of story. In addition to the two couples, we meet the bride's parents (Gagan Dev Riar and Palomi Ghosh), struggling under the financial burdens of the wedding festivities; the wealthy family elder (Alok Tewari), a California moneybags who takes an unhealthy interest in a much-younger cousin (Rhea Yadav); and an orphaned cousin, Ria (Sharvari Deshpande), raised as a kind of older sister to the bride. And that's not to mention the bride's married lover (Manik Singh Anand), the impatient mother of the wedding planner (Sargam Ipshita Bali) – as well as the parents, spouses and children of many of these characters, all of them given speaking roles. (The cast numbers 26 in all.)

Monsoon Wedding, which opened at Off-Broadway's St Ann's Warehouse after nearly a decade of development, is like a colourful but overstuffed samosa that pays tribute to the music and culture of India without fully bringing them to life in a coherent and memorable story. Vishal Bhardwaj's ballad-heavy score is a blend of Eastern and Western influences, backed by an eight-piece band that includes a sitar, sousaphone and Indian percussion. But the 22 tunes, which often end abruptly, do little to flesh out either the plot or the characters. (There's only one solo number – prettily sung by Deshpande as the NYU-bound cousin Ria who yearns for independence from the toxic masculinity of older Indian society.) The rote lyrics, by Masi Asare and Susan Birkenhead, are frequently forgettable variations on the obvious: 'Winds they are blowing / soon rain will be flowing.'

> "The score is a blend of East and West – the band includes a sitar and a sousaphone"

The evening perks up when Bhardwaj goes full Bollywood in a handful of bouncy ensemble numbers like 'Aunties Are Coming' and especially the second-act showstopper 'Chuk Chuk', an over-the-top chase to the train station that makes the most of David Bengali's cinematic projections, Arjun Bhasin's costumes and Shampa Gopikrishna's far-too-infrequent choreography. There is a kind of energy and passion on the stage that makes us forget how expendable this song is to the mechanics of the story. And it offers a hint of what Nair might have achieved if she had more willingly abandoned the hyper-realism of her movie for a more stylised adaptation willing to loosen its sari a bit.

Despite theatrical flourishes like an onstage rainstorm, Nair's approach as director remains stubbornly cinematic. With so many characters and subplots to follow, it's hard to tell where we should focus from scene to scene. Worse, the plot challenges that pop up (such as the Hindu wedding planner's reluctance to marry a Christian girl) are resolved in a way that feels both rushed and pat. (Yes, his mum actually advises him in song: 'The heart knows what it knows.') By giving so much weight to such a large cast, you begin to ponder alternative narratives: the NYU-bound Ria, for instance, seems like a better match for the Ivy-educated banker than her pampered 'South Delhi Girl' cousin – even if Ria is unlikely to agree to an arranged marriage.

But imagining what might have been is not how classic Broadway musicals – or Bollywood romances – are supposed to work. The inevitable happy ending should feel like the only possible conclusion. Still, *Monsoon Wedding* has many virtues, including an Indian-accented look and sound that have seldom found a home on New York stages.

Thom Geier

Production credits

Cast Salena Qureshi, Sharvari Deshpande, Gagan Dev Riar, Palomi Ghosh, Deven Kolluri, Namit Das, Anisha Nagarajan, Sargam Ipshita Bali *et al*
Direction Mira Nair
Musical supervision, direction Emily Whitaker
Orchestrations Jamshied Sharifi, Rona Siddiqui
Choreography Shampa Gopikrishna
Movement direction Carrie-Anne Ingrouille
Set Jason Ardizzone-West
Lighting Bradley King
Sound David Schnirman
Costumes Arjun Bhasin
Projections David Bengali

PHOTOGRAPHY: Matthew Murphy

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Sesame Street: The Musical

Jonathan Rockefeller book
Joe Raposo, Jeff Moss, Helen Park, Tom Kitt et al music, lyrics
Theater 555, New York 29 July – 29 October 2023
REVIEWED ON 5 AUGUST 2023

A variety of puppets so numerous they may even challenge the Count: Oscar the Grouch, Gabrielle and the cast of Jonathan Rockefeller's Sesame Street: The Musical

Sunny days have returned to Off Broadway, and everything's A-OK. *Sesame Street* has arrived in a new musical that offers much of the charm of the beloved TV series. It's also a good introduction to live theatre for pintsize fans of Grover, Abby Cadabby and Elmo – whose entrance got the biggest reaction at the midday performance I attended. (The family-friendly schedule includes three Saturday performances, starting at 9:30am, and only one evening show, at 7pm on Wednesday.)

While writer-director Jonathan Rockefeller's plot owes a lot to *The Muppet Show*, with the gang working together to put on a live show, familiar Muppet stars like Kermit and Miss Piggy are nowhere to be seen. Nor are Big Bird or Snuffleupagus, the two giant puppets who are regulars on the long-running PBS series for preschool-age kids. But we do get favourites like the Cookie Monster and Oscar the Grouch, who offers a nod to the new medium by introducing himself as 'critic at large for the *New Yuck Times*' because, as he explains: 'I love to write about stinky, rotten, trashy things.'

Happily, this show is worthy of no such pan – instead offering a series of short scenes that share the spotlight among classic characters as well as relative newbies like the Spanish-speaking Rosita and Gabrielle, who sports two Afro puffs of frizzy hair. Cookie Monster sings his standby 'C Is for Cookie,' while Ernie croons 'Rubber Duckie' in the bath as bubble machines pump soapy spheres into the auditorium from both sides of the stage.

There are also inside jokes playing on the passions of grown-up theatre geeks. The venue is littered with posters for Muppet-themed parodies of recent Broadway hits, from 'Groverton' and 'Elmoklahoma' to 'Some Like It Honk.' Bert jokes about calling his agent, Grover admits that he's both an actor *and* 'a professional waiter', while Oscar's number about dumpstered items features puppet versions of a broken umbrella, trombone and trophy – the last of which resembles a Tony Award. (All were designed by Jim Henson's Creature Shop.)

> "Rockefeller's musical offers a wonderful mix of old whimsy and modern touches"

Broadway veterans like Tom Kitt (*Next to Normal*) and Helen Park (*KPOP*) contribute some of the new songs, including Cookie Monster's 'Me Am What Me Am,' a nod to Albin's *La Cage aux Folles* anthem, this time about an unapologetic love of cookies ('Sometimes eat whole / Sometimes me chew it').

Rockefeller's production offers a wonderful mix of old whimsy and modern touches – and leans heavily on a variety of puppet characters so numerous they may even challenge the Count. Expressive numerals perform a 0-to-12 routine, two loose-limbed Day-Glo rabbit creatures cut loose in a funky dance break, and an orchestra of Honkers thump their plush schnozes to play their tune.

Not to be a grouch, but the momentum can flag when the lone human appears onstage – a 'guest star' played by the perky Genevieve Joers. Her training for the big finale provides the show's narrative spine, but it's hard for a mere mortal to compete with the furry monsters who are the main attractions here.

Some younger theatergoers also started squirming well before the curtain call arrived at the 70-minute mark – though the cannons shooting out glittery streamers during the finale supplied a welcome energy boost. Most were captivated by seeing their small-screen idols up close and in person – and tempted by the stuffed versions beckoning at the merch stands just outside the theatre doors.

Thom Geier

Production credits

Cast Mecca Akbar, Mia Ivana Castillo, Yanniv Frank, Joe Newman-Getzler, Genevieve Joers, Rebecca Russell, Dustin Scully, Matteo Villanueva, Anthony White *et al*
Direction Jonathan Rockefeller
Set, prop design Rockefeller Productions
Puppets, costumes Jim Henson's Creature Shop
Music direction, sound Nate Edmondson
Lighting Jeremy Burd

PHOTOGRAPHY: Courtesy of Rockefeller Studios

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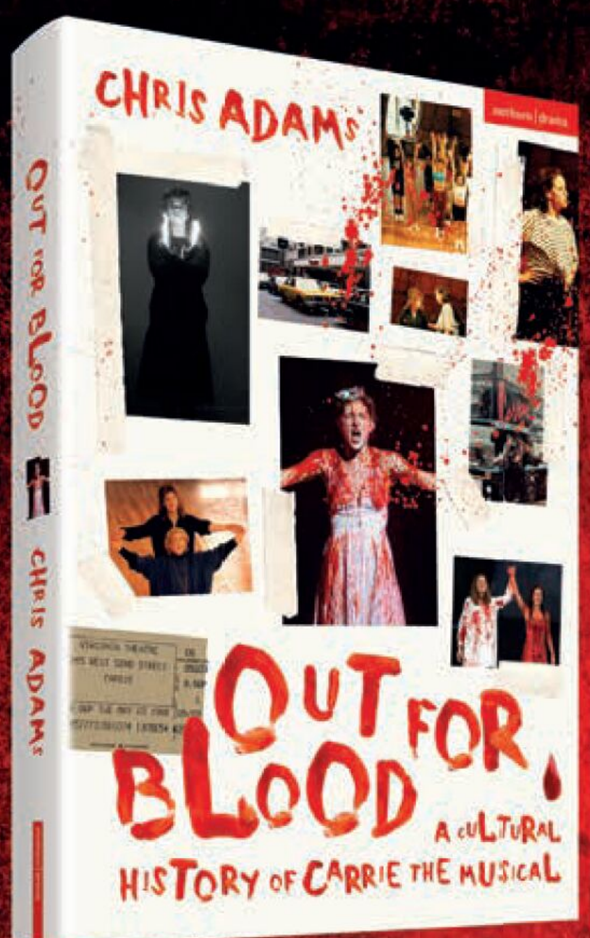

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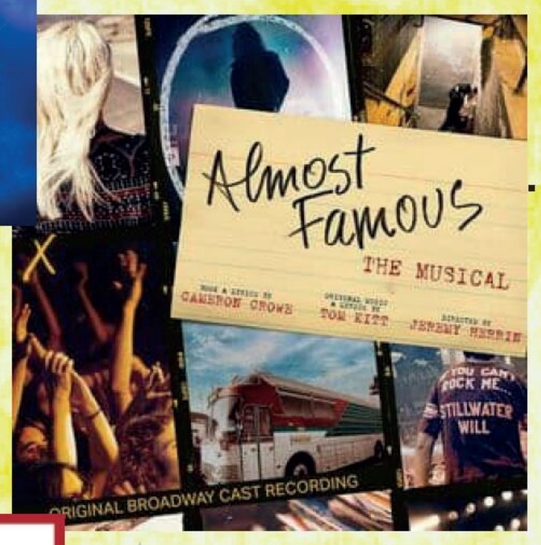

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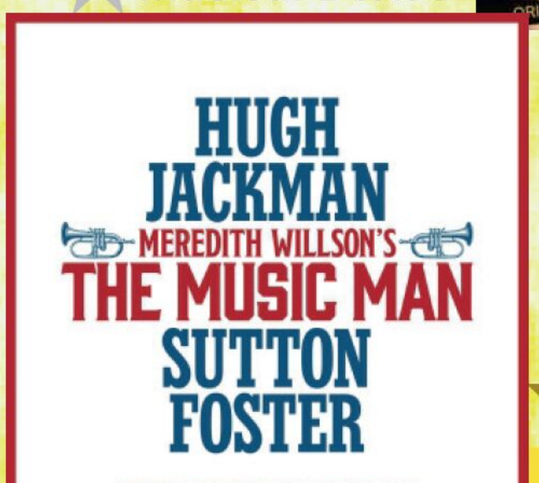

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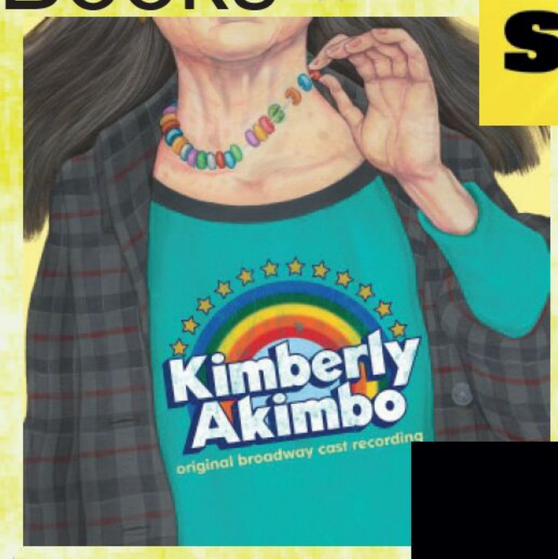

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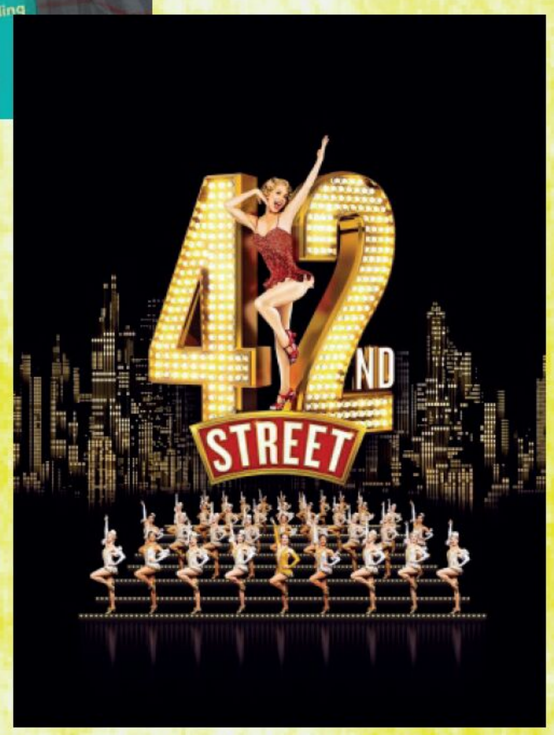

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Recording reviews

The latest Musical Theatre recordings, reviewed by our esteemed panel of experts

A Collective Cy: Jeff Harnar Sings Cy Coleman

JEFF HARNAR WITH GUESTS

"Harnar and Coleman are a match made in musical heaven"

Guest artists Ann Hampton Callaway, Liz Callaway, Nicolas King, Danny Bacher, Sean Harkness, Jay Leonhart, Alex Rybeck
Producer Bart Migal
Orchestra / Alex Rybeck
PS Classics
RELEASED 8 SEPTEMBER 2023

Within the Great American Songbook, there are few composers who have walked the divide between popular music and Broadway as confidently as Cy Coleman. In a career spanning six decades, Coleman brought a fresh, contemporary aesthetic to Musical Theatre with hits such as *Sweet Charity*, *On the Twentieth Century*, *Barnum* and *City of Angels*. But even before that, Coleman had penned many other songs, including the two Sinatra hits 'Witchcraft' and 'The Best Is Yet to Come' (with Carolyn Leigh).

It's this affinity with popular music that makes the album 'A Collective Cy' such a satisfying easy listen. It helps enormously, of course, that multi-award-winning cabaret and recording artist Jeff Harnar is at the helm, supported by his long-term MD Alex Rybeck and a full orchestra.

As a live performer, Harnar debuted this Coleman anthology in 2006 to critical acclaim, winning the coveted Bistro Award for Outstanding Show the following year. The artist has forged a successful career, interpreting Broadway's finest composers such as Porter, Gershwin and Sondheim.

It's clear from the outset that Harnar and Coleman are a match made in musical heaven. Coleman's musical roots were embedded in jazz and Harnar's warm, sophisticated jazz-centric vocals lend themselves seamlessly to his songs.

However, it's possibly the song choices that are most fascinating here. Coleman was a master of the mid-century love song and Harnar runs with this theme, with a recording that somehow captures the intimacy of an upmarket cabaret bar. The Broadway hits are present and correct, from the hippie-inspired beats of 'Rhythm of Life' to the soulful blues of 'With Every Breath I Take' from *City of Angels*.

'So Little Time', originally cut from *Barnum*, is an absolute gem – beautifully constructed and bittersweet. Conversely 'My Personal Property', added to the movie version of *Sweet Charity*, sings out with a light touch and overarching sense of joy. Harnar brings greater nuance and astounding vocal control to that Sinatra signature 'Witchcraft', whereas the tumultuous belter 'If My Friends Could See Me Now' has been successfully flipped into a gentle, contemplative but no less uplifting ballad.

This mellow, thoughtfully curated album features some special guest vocalists including Liz Callaway, who lends real sophistication to the romance of 'Our Private World' from *On the Twentieth Century*. Jay Leonhart and Rybeck bring a lightness of touch to the carefree '(Doop Doo-De-Oop) A Doodlin' Song', and Ann Hampton Callaway proves the perfect pairing with Harnar for the deliciously knowing 'I've Got Your Number'.

Paul Vale

Jeff Harnar is a superb interpreter of Cy Coleman, as his new album illustrates

Guys & Dolls

2023 LONDON CAST RECORDING
Frank Loesser music, lyrics
Jo Swerling, Abe Burrows book

"New orchestrations make this a fresh take, not a dutiful re-retread"

Cast Daniel Mays, Andrew Richardson, Marisha Wallace, Celinde Schoenmaker *et al*
Orchestrations Charlie Rosen
Musical supervision/ arrangements/direction Tom Brady
Broadway Records
RELEASED 29 SEPTEMBER 2023

The oddest thing about *Guys & Dolls*, widely regarded as the finest ever musical comedy, is that it's never had a truly satisfactory recording. Despite indelible performances, the original cast recording is more like a highlights disc and sounds as if it were made down a corridor, something the 2000 remastering sought to solve but which instead wound up seeming to be sung in a cardboard box. There are pluses and minuses to every subsequent recording, and now comes the latest via Nicholas Hytner's frankly joyous new London production, complete with interlinking dialogue.

With new orchestrations, this is a fresh take, not a dutiful re-retread. Not that musical supervisor/arranger Tom Brady has made changes for change's sake. This is very much a record of a period piece yet in a 2023 frame.

On the plus side, the balance between performers and the band is ideal, with every single lyric audible. But that clarity comes at a price: the singers are so close-miked that the sense of being in a theatre is lost. The only other downside is one number that sounds out of kilter. Composer/ lyricist Loesser's genius lay in his ability to make vernacular lyrics fit music to sound like natural speech, but in 'I'll Know', both Celinde Schoenmaker's Sarah and Andrew Richardson's Sky seem enslaved to a plodding rhythm rather than using it to illuminate lines and character. But both make up for that on all their other tracks.

Without overplaying, Schoenmaker banishes the notion that Sarah is the least interesting role, notably in her deliciously sexually released 'If I Were a Bell'. She and everyone else is aided by orchestrations glowing with romance and strong on imaginative, comic underlining.

PHOTOGRAPHY: Kevin Alvey / Kevin Yatarola

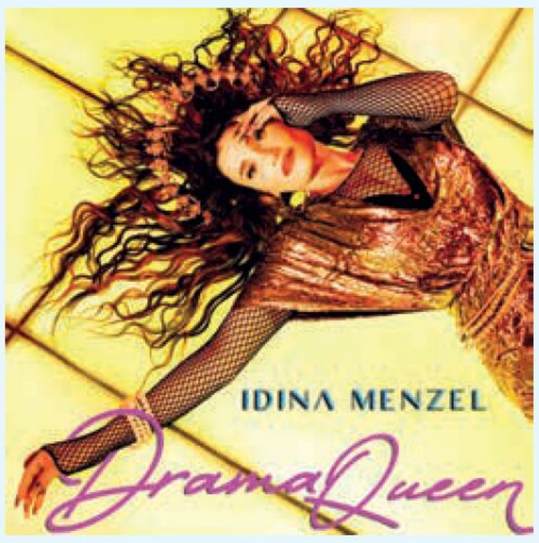
Best of all, the ballsy brass and sax-drenched sound yell 'sass' whenever possible. The Havana number is alive with zesty Cuban rhythms, percussion and piano, while 'Take Back Your Mink' – which features everything from comic solo violin, clarinet and pizzicato strings to stripper-style raunch – is a triumph.

As the Hot Box leading light Miss Adelaide, show-stealing Marisha Wallace is having the kind of solid gold, ring-a-ding-ding fun that Hugh Grant had in *Paddington 2*. Canny, sultry, funny and surprisingly vulnerable by turn, she mines every moment for truth, nowhere more so than in the brilliantly directed 'Sue Me', her duet with Daniel Mays's wonderfully characterised Nathan – which plays as nothing less than a full-blown marital row that happens to be (very well) sung.

At 34 tracks, including two encores of Cedric Neal's gospel-fired 'Sit Down, You're Rockin' the Boat', plus dance remixes, the disc is in a league of its own. If you cannot get to the show, it's the next best thing.

David Benedict

Idina Menzel: Drama Queen



"Menzel sounds like a genuine pop singer, while retaining her power from the stage"

BMG

RELEASED 18 AUGUST 2023

She might be best known for playing Elsa in Disney's Oscar-winning *Frozen*, but Tony Award-winner Idina Menzel is also experienced on the pop and solo scenes. She put out a self-titled recording in 2016, before a festive album in 2019 that saw her duet with the likes of Ariana Grande and Billy Porter. 'Drama Queen', her latest release, hits the disco floor, a colourful foray into the world of dance music.

It's not always mentioned that Menzel is a multi-platinum singer-songwriter. For this album, she has co-written with fellow multi-platinum pop songwriters Nolan Lambroza (Selena Gomez, Tate McRae, Shawn Mendes) and Simon Wilcox (Carly Rae Jepsen, Demi Lovato, Liam Payne), while Jake Shears of the Scissor Sisters co-produces.

Nile Rodgers even drops by for one song, 'Paradise'. This number spotlights a notable trait that makes so many of these songs so infectious: rhythm. A bass guitar provides a head-bobbing groove in that song, while elsewhere 'Move' will get us doing just that, filled as it is with short hooky melodies and, later on, darting strings.

There's a refreshing contrast in texture with the lower-mood, uncluttered verses of 'Funny Kind of Lonely' and 'Madison Hotel' – although, in the latter, I found the return to the quiet piano opening at the end jarring, as the up-tempo dance chorus morphs into cocktail-vibe keys; surprising and creative, yes, but perhaps unnecessary. Both songs also have moments where Menzel lets loose on her trademark high notes, a reminder of her Elsa/Elphaba pedigree.

It's a skill indeed for a musician so well-versed in Musical Theatre to translate so naturally to writing pop songs, which have fewer lyrics, less story, shorter melodic phrases and feature more repetition. I suppose the kind of shows that have made Menzel's name – *Rent*, *Wicked*, *Frozen* – have writers who themselves lean freely into the pop idiom; perhaps they proved the perfect training ground. Credit, too, to the production, which always has dashes of instrumental colour and rhythm that keep you listening to the background as well as the foreground – not so dissimilar from a good theatre score.

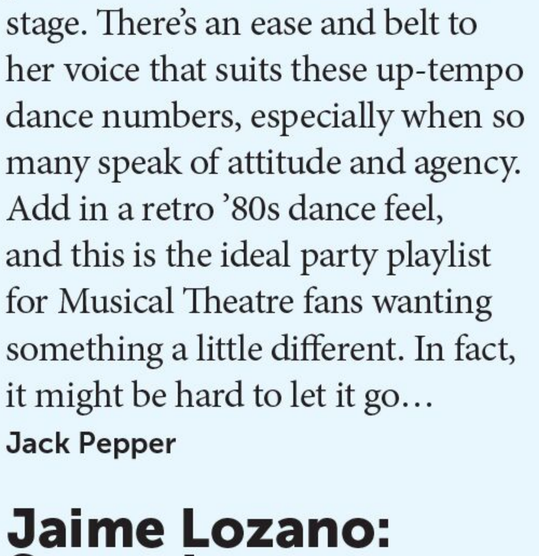
Ultimately, 'Drama Queen' provides a refreshing reminder of Menzel's versatility. She sounds like a genuine pop singer, free of any theatrical performance hangovers while retaining the range and power we know so well from the stage. There's an ease and belt to her voice that suits these up-tempo dance numbers, especially when so many speak of attitude and agency. Add in a retro '80s dance feel, and this is the ideal party playlist for Musical Theatre fans wanting something a little different. In fact, it might be hard to let it go…

Jack Pepper

Jaime Lozano channels personal experience in his Songs by an Immigrant

Jaime Lozano: Songs by an Immigrant Vol 2

Jaime Lozano and The Familia



"Latin rhythms dominate, but there's a New York lilt, too"

Guest artists Mandy Gonzalez, Mauricio Martínez, Robin de Jesús, David Cavazos, Eden Espinosa, Ana Villafãne *et al*

Various musicians

Concord Theatricals

RELEASED 15 SEPTEMBER 2023

Mexican-born, New York-based composer Jaime Lozano counts Lin-Manuel Miranda among his fans. And, much like the *In the Heights* creator, Lozano channels immigrant experience into his second volume of songs, which shares the same title as the first.

This new release by the composer, whose Spanish forename should be pronounced more like the Jewish 'Hymie' rather than the Jamie of *Everybody's Talking About* fame, has a soundscape that plays heart strings as consummately as the array of plucked, strummed and bowed instruments deployed by Lozano and his array of musicians. Mexican trumpets also trill delightfully throughout.

The songs here are drawn from an eclectic back catalogue of Musical Theatre and studio projects, and performed and co-written by Lozano's extended 'Familia' of collaborators – such as Broadway's Eden Espinosa (a former Elphaba) and Tommy Newman, with whom Lozano created his Latin adaptation of *The Wizard of Oz* novel, *The Yellow Brick Road*.

From that show, which was Lozano's first Off-Broadway musical, the number 'No Podemos Regresar' ('No Turning Back') is a beautifully performed (by Florencia Cuenca) hymn conveying the risks, dilemmas and motives experienced by Lozano's fellow Mexican migrants – many of whom made much more perilous journeys than he across the border.

Yet most of the music here is concerned with the challenges of living in America rather than getting to it. Themes include settling in, finding a family and, most poignantly in the number 'My Father's Name', the migrant's struggle to remember the language of their forebears.

Latin percussive rhythms dominate, but there's a distinctly New York lilt which evokes Jason Robert Brown, another composer who channels personal experience into his work. Not surprising, then, that a Spanish version of Brown's

autobiographical song cycle *The Last Five Years* was an early project of Lozano's.

Although Lozano is a reluctant writer of English, there are some lines in this collection where it is doubtful he would have done much worse. In 'Here and Now' the couplet 'Nobody knows for sure what life will throw our way / All we can do is live today' is an insight (by lyricist and friend Marina Pires) of rare banality.

Lozano is often led by a sentimental heart rather than a discerning mind. Still, that hotline to emotion does much for the composer's own voice. Heard only once here in 'The Stories We Sing Of', he performs with a roughly hewn tenderness that reflects how, even in a country populated by immigrants, a migrant's life is no picnic.

John Nathan

La Cage aux Folles

ORIGINAL AUSTRALIAN CAST
Jerry Herman music, lyrics
Harvey Fierstein book

"Keith Michell's experience and expertise shine through every bar"

Cast Keith Michell, Jon Ewing, Gerry Sont *et al*
Orchestrations Jim Tyler
Band / Dale Ringland
Sony Masterworks
RELEASED 14 JULY 2023

We had to wait until 1983 for the first Broadway musical featuring what used to be called an 'openly gay' couple. That was Alan Jay Lerner and Charles Strouse's *Dance a Little Closer,* and if you've never heard of it that's because it opened and closed on the same night – though, mercifully, it was preserved on disc. The characters, however, were subsidiary with one duet. Two years later, Jerry Herman and Harvey Fierstein finally placed a gay relationship centre stage in *La Cage aux Folles*.

Broadway star Will Swenson and Diane Phelan in the studio for The Big Time

That six-Tony-winning production opened in Sydney in 1985. Although it was recorded and released on vinyl, only now is it available digitally. So, was it worth the wait?

Casting Keith Michell marked a hugely successful return for the Australian actor whose career was mostly based in the UK. Enduringly famous for the title role in the BBC TV series *The Six Wives of Henry VIII*, he was also a Musical Theatre star whose voice powered its way through hits including *Irma La Douce* and *Robert and Elizabeth.* And what's more, he'd spent a year on Broadway in the role as nightclub owner Georges.

His experience and expertise shine through every bar. The more gruff of the two men, his character holds the show's 1970s farce plot together and his control is wonderfully evident thanks to a complete vocal authority. Stripping 'Song on the Sand' of its borderline sentimentality, his gloriously impassioned singing transforms the song into a passionate expression of love.

As his partner Albin, leading Australian MT actor Jon Ewing is less of a singer, per se, but the recording captures his winning ability to express dramatic intent. Not a single lyric is taken for granted: he gives every word and thought witty point and punch. The only faint disappointment is the show's key number, 'I Am What I Am'. Ewing imbues it with dignity and triumph, but both George Hearn in the original Broadway cast and a superbly fierce Douglas Hodge in the West End and Broadway revivals gave it more shocking savagery.

Indeed, in this recording, the climax of that number happens arguably less in the singing than in the orchestra, with woodwind squealing deliciously on top of the band playing at full pelt. Indeed, from the Overture onwards, the band, with ardent strings, sassy brass and the crystal-clear ping and zing of tuned percussion and harp, is so beautifully recorded that it becomes the show's third star. A highly welcome release.

David Benedict

Oklahoma!

STUDIO RECORDING
Richard Rodgers music
Oscar Hammerstein II book, lyrics

"It's not just an impressive historic reconstruction – it also makes the heart dance"

Cast Nathaniel Hackmann, Sierra Boggess, Rodney Earl Clarke, Jamie Parker, Louise Dearman, Sandra Marvin, Nadim Naaman, Leo Roberts *et al*
Orchestrations Robert Russell Bennett
Oklahoma! Ensemble
Sinfonia of London / John Wilson
Chandos Records
RELEASED 15 SEPTEMBER 2023

Oh, what a beautiful mornin'! Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* is about new beginnings, and from the first flourish of the Overture, this new studio recording by John Wilson and the Sinfonia of London just nails it. You might have experienced Wilson's joyous *Oklahoma!* at the 2017 BBC Proms, which was necessarily on a different scale. But the energy here is the same, as is Wilson's commitment to finding an appropriate soundworld for Robert Russell Bennett's original orchestrations.

And here it is: bustling forward with the lean textures, rhythmic clarity and headlong drive of an authentic Broadway pit band. There's a convincingly dry theatre acoustic, which feels just right. Wilson compares this to a 'period instrument' recording of a Baroque opera; the numbers and instrumentation of the band are identical to those used in the first Broadway run. The result is the single most complete account (without dialogue) of that full original score as performed in 1943, complete with scene changes, underscoring and the whole of that revolutionary dream ballet.

But it's not just an impressive historic reconstruction – it also makes the heart dance. Nathaniel Hackmann (Curly) and Sierra Boggess (Laurey) have sunshine in their voices, soaring easily over the orchestra with just the right amount of vibrato. In fact (heresy, I know), they're arguably better matched, vocally, than Joan Roberts and the ripe-sounding Albert Drake on the heavily truncated original cast recording.

The chorus is alert and stylish, and Rodney Earl Clarke digs deep under the uncomfortable skin of Jud Fry, with Wilson bringing out the eerie, shifting colours of Bennett's orchestrations in 'Lonely Room' (the original scoring includes oboe d'amore and bass oboe; the lack of an orchestra list is a rare oversight in Chandos's otherwise excellent documentation). If Louise Dearman is an altogether more precise Ado Annie than Celeste Holm (at times Dearman almost shades into parody), she makes an engaging pairing with Jamie Parker's Will.

PHOTOGRAPHY: Horacio Rojas

Of course, this isn't a remake: it's a 21st-century *Oklahoma!* that treats this score with the respect due to a masterpiece and the full-blooded emotional engagement demanded by a living work of art. You wouldn't mistake it for a live theatrical performance; the singers and orchestra are too skilfully balanced for that. But the revelation of Bennett's full orchestral palate, the generosity of the singing, and the effortless verve of the Sinfonia's playing more than compensates.

The original cast recording is already essential listening for anyone who loves *Oklahoma!* – and now this is, too.

Richard Bratby

The Big Time

Douglas J Cohen
music, lyrics
Douglas Carter Beane book

"Cohen's references to 20th-century composers come fast and furious"

Cast Santino Fontana, Debbie Gravitte, Will Swenson, Jackie Hoffman, Michael McCormick, Diane Phelan *et al*
Orchestrations
August Eriksmoen
Additional arrangements
Noah Landis
Music director, conductor
Eric Stern
Concord Theatricals
RELEASED 8 SEPTEMBER 2023

If you're looking for old-timey musical comedy hijinks, the new studio recording of *The Big Time* is stacked with rip-roaring turns from Broadway veterans – including two Tony winners. While Douglas Carter Beane's book about the shipboard shenanigans of an unlikely band of entertainers and criminals recalls 1934's *Anything Goes*, Douglas J Cohen's score is more of a paean to the lighthearted musicals of the 1950s-'60s and the TV variety shows of the day that often gave Broadway stars their first national exposure.

Set in 1962 at the height of the Cold War, the cockamamie plot involves a NATO peacekeeping cruise with the mission of nothing less than staving off the destruction of the free world. This wacky time machine of a show is also chock-full of allusions to scads of stage and screen musicals.

Cohen's musical references come fast and furious, from jazzy inflections *à la* Cy Coleman to a pantherine Henry Mancini homage and Kander and Ebb-ish vamps. August Eriksmoen's period-specific arrangements for a band of 16 are awash in trumpet mutes and tinkly piano. Beane's interstitial dialogue favours suggestive exchanges such as when the saucy accusation 'You are flirtating all over me' elicits the unabashed response 'It slips out'.

Everyone in the cast of eight seems to be having a blast. In the central roles of Tony and Donna Stevenitti, Santino Fontana and Debbie Gravitte are such perfect doppelgangers for Steve Lawrence and Eydie Gormé that you can easily imagine their being mistaken for them, which is in fact the crucial misunderstanding that sets the plot spinning.

Fontana has Lawrence's suave baritone stylings down pat, and Gravitte's lush alto with brassy vibrato gorgeously recalls Gormé's idiosyncratic vocal timbre, even as she mines the comedy in her tough-as-nails Bronx accent.

And then there are the irrepressible Jackie Hoffman and Will Swenson as Russian spies. Hoffman employs a *sui generis* go-for-broke comedic style that combines Borscht Belt schtick with a warbly high soprano. Swenson's offbeat performance suggests that this dashing Broadway leading man might be an even more talented character actor as he brandishes a preposterous Russian accent with relish and still manages to sing beautifully.

Yes, the plot is overly complicated and the score could use a genuinely affecting ballad or a truly rousing anthem, but no show is perfect. All things considered, this one literally sounds like a boatload of fun.

Jim Munson

Classic recording...
Follies

ORIGINAL BROADWAY CAST RECORDING

Stephen Sondheim
music, lyrics
James Goldman book

"Nobody in this original cast is 'selling' the songs: they are living them"

Cast John McMartin, Dorothy Collins, Alexis Smith, Gene Nelson, Yvonne De Carlo *et al*
Orchestra / Harold Hastings
Broadway Angel/Capitol
RELEASED 1971

The genius of Stephen Sondheim and James Goldman's *Follies* lies in its evocation of an era – and, as much as I have admired a succession of stagings and indeed recordings over the years (not least, most recently, Dominic Cooke's unforgettable National Theatre rendition), it was the Original Broadway Cast recording of 1971 that first enveloped me in a unique sound world which to this day I can only describe as 'Ziegfeld lavish'.

Jonathan Tunick captured it for Sondheim in all its swooning glory, silken saxes and strings overlaid with the wide vibrato of Broadway trumpets. I can still remember to this day the first-time thrill of the full pit band exploding as Roscoe brings on his 'Beautiful Girls' and the simple piano and rhythm accompaniment is swept aside with an opulence no longer seen but richly imagined in sound.

And I really don't think it's a case of fanciful nostalgia on my part that this cast recording still makes all others sound and feel counterfeit. It's that word again – *style* – and it may have to do with the 1970s being a turning point, if you like, between old and new Broadway.

It also has to do with a bunch of creatives rejoicing in what can only be described as a sense of discovery in material that proves such a good fit for them. Nobody in this original cast is 'selling' the songs; they are living them. Imagine Yvonne De Carlo taking receipt of 'I'm Still Here' quite late in the out-of-town tryouts. Her delivery of that number (one of Sondheim's truly gobsmacking lyrics) honestly suggests a seasoned raconteur casually doing what she does whenever there's an audience. Been there, done that.

And it's absolutely not about the singing or the voices with any of this cast but the drama, the theatricality, of the songs. You feel the presence of Goldman's book in the way the numbers are acted out. This is domestic drama subtly subsumed into a lavish theatrical revue.

Listen to Dorothy Collins and John McMartin (according to Sondheim one of the greatest stage performances he ever saw) in the heart-rending 'Too Many Mornings' and tell me you don't know what the entire piece is about. And if you still don't, Ben's 'The Road You Didn't Take' will put you right (inconceivable it should have been cut for the Cameron Mackintosh revamp).

Some of the intonation is indelible. There's Collins in that nervous breakdown masquerading as a torch song 'Losing My Mind', her sound inseparable from the song itself and the time taken over the closing pages suggestive of a terrible loneliness in the wee small hours. Ben's breakdown follows. And the shock of it still resonates from the first time I played the LP.

Edward Seckerson

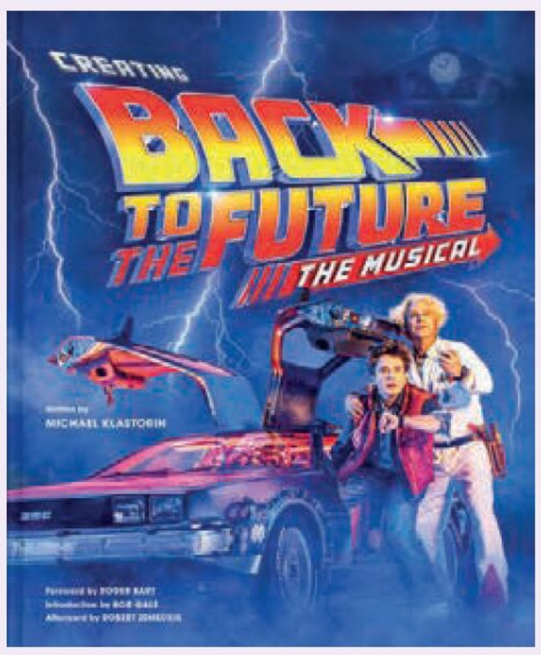
Book reviews

An extra section this issue on good Musical Theatre reads – the perfect gift guide!

Creating Back to the Future: The Musical

Michael Klastorin

Hardcover, 240 pages



> This is a volume that is intent on travelling through history at 88 miles per hour

Abrams Books

PUBLISHED 6 JULY 2023

Large-format explorations of the creation of a modern musical have become a fresh addition to theatre merchandise, with the 2016 'Hamiltome', *Hamilton: The Revolution*, leading the way.

This style of documentary book, where in-depth developmental history sits beside annotated lyrics, was repeated for the transition of *In The Heights* from stage to screen. And now, Michael Klastorian uses the form to record the opposite direction: 1985's *Back to the Future* and its path to becoming a West End hit.

Klastorin narrates how after seeing *The Producers* on Broadway, the original movie's director/screenwriter Robert Zemeckis collaborated with co-writer Bob Gale and the film's composer Alan Silvestri to create a musical, despite none of them having any experience in doing so.

They wisely soon acquire experienced voices: Silvestri's songwriting partner Glen Ballard had worked on *Ghost the Musical*, and those connections also bring in producer Colin Ingram. From there, the gathering of talent comes thick and fast in Klastorin's account, although the fascinating, albeit brief, dalliance with Jamie Lloyd as a possible director takes less than a page to be mentioned and then dismissed.

The narrative is mostly linear, but, perhaps appropriately for a time-travelling fantasy, there are occasional temporal diversions to look into the history of a song change or story edit. Klastorin has a tendency to repeat anecdotes whenever needed, which can get draining if read in a single sitting. But as the work progresses from workshop to tryout to West End, the adjustments and reconfigurations are relayed with crisp clarity.

With the addition of director John Rando and actor Roger Bart, among many other experienced theatre-makers, the progression to a fully developed musical plays out remarkably smoothly. Notable challenges, including the truncation of the Manchester tryout due to Covid and Bart's positive test just before the West End press night, are dealt with briskly; this is a volume that is intent on travelling through history at 88 miles per hour.

The book's second half presents annotated lyrics, outlining some of the production choices that made it to the stage. A particular delight in this section is the universal love throughout for Cedric Neal (Goldie Wilson), whom Ballard describes as 'maybe the best singer in all of England'. All the cast are similarly praised, and Bart's contributions to Doc Brown's absurd whimsy are self-evident.

Yet it's the tales of constant iteration, of finding those emotional beats that have to work differently onstage than on film, that provide this work's highlights. While not every new musical may receive such detailed chronicling, it's great fun to experience *Back to the Future* in this form.

Scott Matthewman

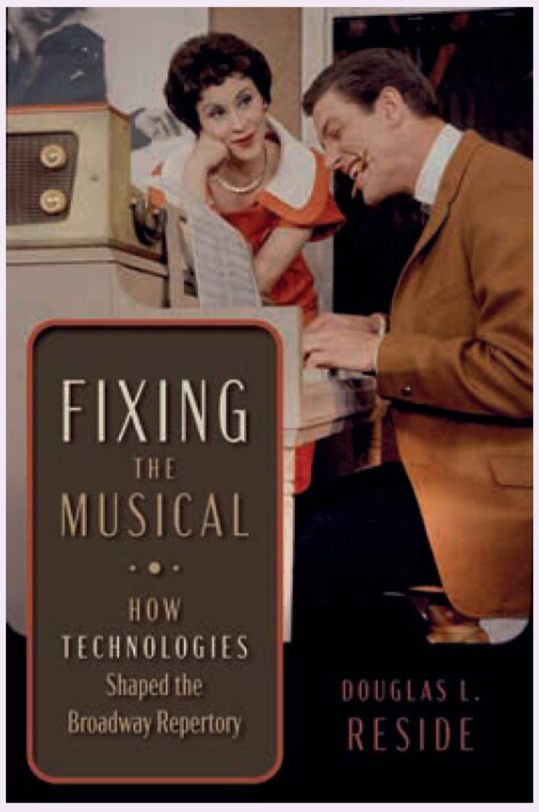
A new book traces Back to the Future: The Musical's route to the West End

PHOTOGRAPHY: Danny Wirick

Fixing the Musical: How Technologies Shaped the Broadway Repertory

Douglas L Reside

Hardback, 192 pages



> This painstakingly researched text is a love letter to how audiences consume shows

Oxford University Press

PUBLISHED 25 OCTOBER 2023

Sondheim famously quipped that 'musicals aren't written, they're rewritten'. And in the current climate for revisionist revivals – most recently *Camelot* at New York's Lincoln Center with a new book by Aaron Sorkin – no show is ever truly set in stone.

Which is interesting when you consider how deeply nostalgia and iconic visual moments from original stagings – Dolly Levi and the dancing waiters, the *Phantom* boat scene – are imprinted on people's minds. In the language of author Douglas L Reside this comes under the category of 'fixed' shows: the idea that a particular staging, printed text, cast album or recorded performance might be considered the 'definitive' take on a particular piece.

Reside's painstakingly researched text is a love letter to how audiences consume shows – from the first printed libretti through to the hit parade sheet music sales of the Tin Pan Alley era, ending bang up to date with the Disney+ distribution of *Hamilton* during Covid. His section on bootlegging videos was a particular favourite – charting the boom of the '80s and '90s megamusicals where the commercial merchandising nous of Cameron Mackintosh met the era of home video and ghettoblasters.

While the focus of the book is solely Musical Theatre work, what emerges is nothing less than a cultural history of how pieces reach their public, and the myriad ways some works stay in people's minds because they have been captured in some form. Meanwhile, others go unrecorded and forgotten.

Imagine how many great scores may have been lost to history because they didn't have the advantage of being recorded?

Back in 1997, Gary Taylor explored this very issue across all art forms in *Cultural Selection*. But it's wonderful to see this same level of care applied to Musical Theatre specifically, where so much can change during the development, rehearsal and preview processes. Or, as in the case of *Cabaret* or *The Sound of Music*, when the global reach of the film starts to impact on which songs are incorporated for the stage.

This is, unapologetically, an academic text of scholarly heft. On those terms, Reside makes an important contribution to the golden age of Musical Theatre academic writing we are living through right now. It's truly moving to see works in the Broadway repertory so lovingly studied, deconstructed and respected for the craft-driven milestones that they are.

Tim Connor

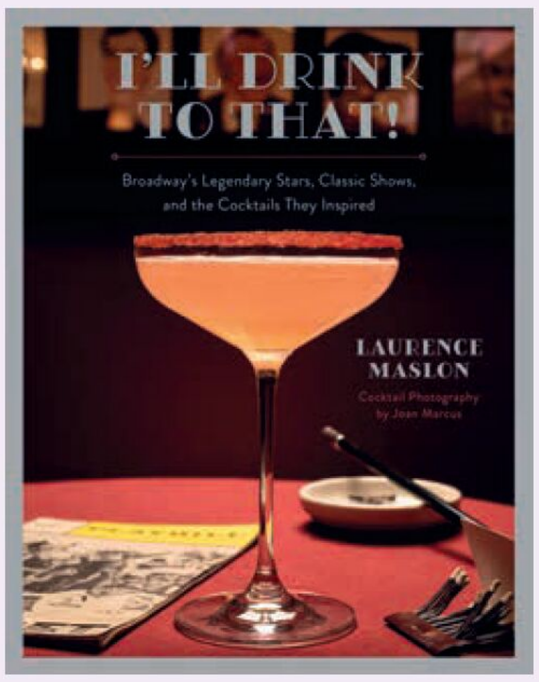
PHOTOGRAPHY: Joan Marcus

Kristin Chenoweth, pictured in On the Twentieth Century, introduces the 'Champagne' section of I'll Drink To That

I'll Drink to That: Broadway's Legendary Stars, Classic Shows, and the Cocktails They Inspired

Laurence Maslon, Joan Marcus

Hardcover, 176 pages



"It's a treat to be reminded of the numerous onstage paeans to drink"

Weldon Owen

PUBLISHED 23 MAY 2023

Drink in the theatre has acquired a bad rep of late, due in no small part to copious reports – in the UK especially – of inebriated audiences causing disruptions, and worse, at popular musicals like *Grease* and *The Bodyguard* especially. What better time, then, for an elegantly produced reminder of the classier connection that exists between alcohol and the stage, as penned by the veteran theatre writer Laurence Maslon?

His witty commingling of potent potables with performance comes accompanied by an array of mouth-watering photographs of elixirs courtesy of the distinguished New York theatre photographer Joan Marcus. I've long revelled in the joyous song 'L'Chaim' from *Fiddler on the Roof* – a buoyant counterpoint to the hardships chronicled elsewhere in that show. But I never thought that title would find an alcoholic equivalent in the form of the nutmeg-infused concoction that may have you, too, searching for the plum brandy, or slivovitz, required for this particular drink, and eye-poppingly shown in the book.

It's a treat to be reminded of the numerous onstage paeans to drink, from the giddy company number at the start of the second act of Stephen Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd* ('God, That's Good!') to the vodka stinger that all but defines the seen-it-all Joanne in her knockout solo 'The Ladies Who Lunch' towards the end of the same composer's *Company*.

Marcus's magical-looking concoctions provide one visual thread: the bourbon-suffused 'Turkey Lurkey Time' from *Promises, Promises* looks capable of inducing the celebrated dance of the same name with which the great Donna McKechnie once stopped that very show (check it out on YouTube). The Jerry Herman musical *Mame* – last seen in the UK with the indefatigable Tracie Bennett in the title role – gives rise to a cooling Mint Julep, though the text is of two minds about the spelling of julep versus julip.

Production shots conjoin with Maslon's ever-spry narrative to remind us of the importance of booze throughout the history of Broadway. That can sometimes make for a bleak result – think of the barflies in a state of drink-fuelled despondency in O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh*. Or, more often, for the giddy and, dare one use this adjective in its original sense, gay bubbles proffered by the likes of *Anything Goes* or *On the Twentieth Century*.

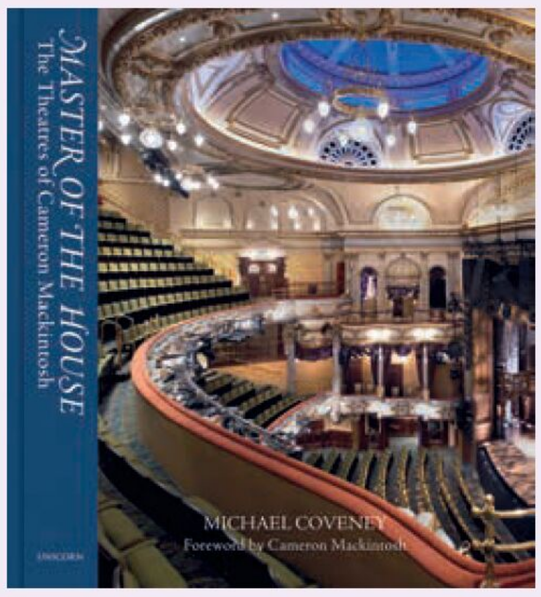
So much of the bevvies on sale at shows these days is tepid (and overpriced) white wine or fizzy drinks sipped through a slurpee cup. This enticing and entertaining book will have you demanding more from your interval mixologist – or wanting to try these for yourselves at home, particularly in the lead-up to those inevitable December festivities. Cheers!

Matt Wolf

Master of the House: The Theatres of Cameron Mackintosh

Michael Coveney (Foreword by Cameron Mackintosh)

Hardcover, 320 pages

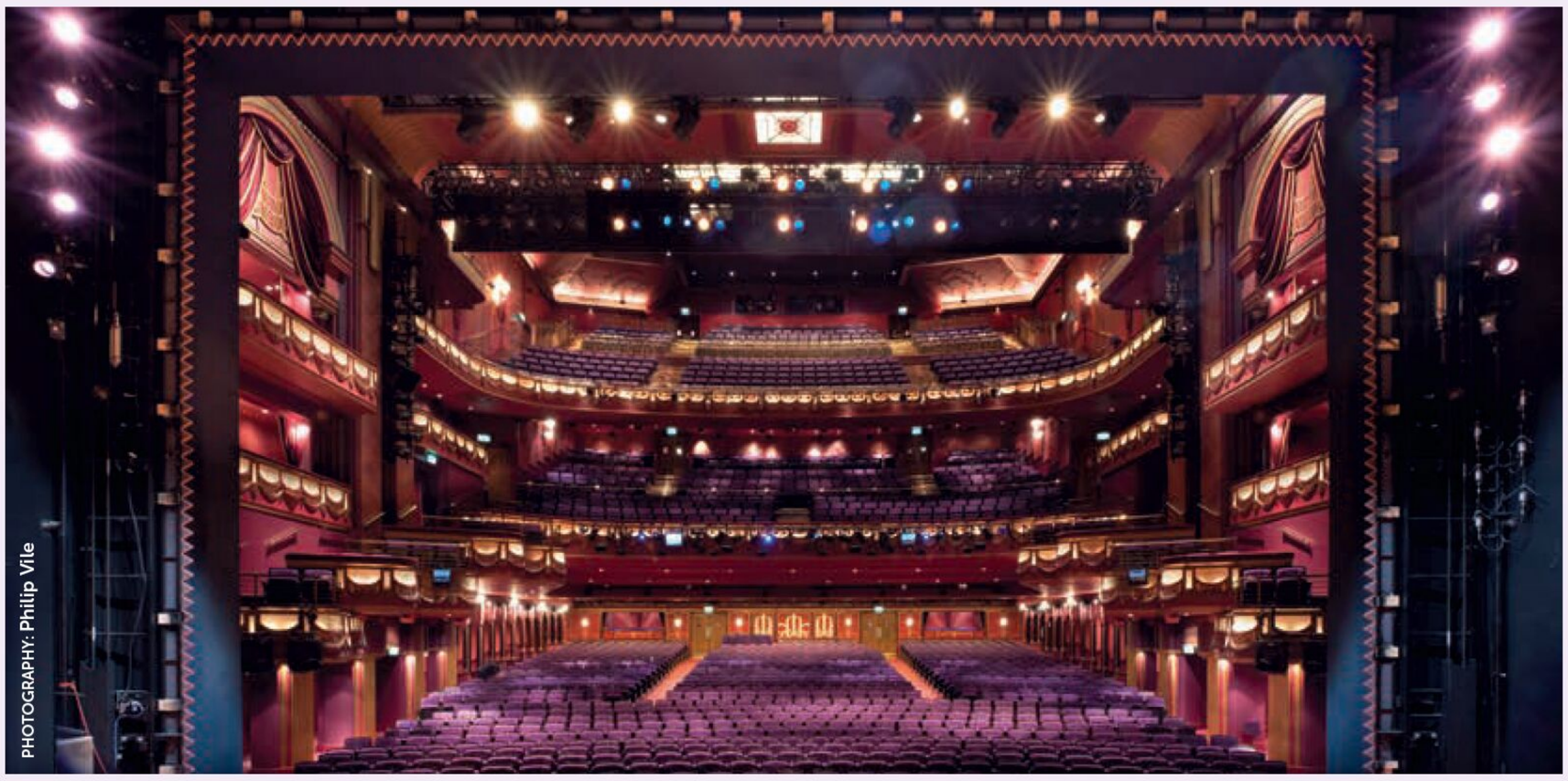


"The text is bountifully accompanied with photos, floor plans and sketches from the archive"

Unicorn Publishing

PUBLISHED 11 OCTOBER 2022

As a producer, Cameron Mackintosh is renowned for his no-expense-spared approach. Michael Coveney's book *Master of the House* – winner of the inaugural Architectural History Book of the Year award this summer as part of the World Architecture Festival – charts the histories of the eight West End theatres owned by Delfont Mackintosh Theatres. A suitably lavish tome, it combines sumptuous visuals with detailed and meticulously researched text.



PHOTOGRAPHY: Philip Vile

PHOTOGRAPHY: Jason Niedle

London's Prince Edward Theatre was one of the first West End venues in which Cameron Mackintosh invested; Emily Lopez plays Carrie in the LA production

Mackintosh's side career in theatre ownership began in 1991 when he was invited by his business partner, Bernard Delfont, to invest in the Prince Edward and Prince of Wales Theatres. Delfont advised it as an insurance plan for when Mackintosh's career as a producer dried up (that hasn't happened yet).

At the time, many Victorian and Edwardian theatres were literally crumbling. Mackintosh's mission, by investing a proportion of the profits into the buildings themselves, was to make them fit for the 21st century by preserving their architectural beauty and historical significance while providing top-notch facilities to all visitors – regardless of whether they hold tickets in the stalls or the gallery – with the intention of providing a night out in surroundings akin to a grand private house.

Coveney, a seasoned theatre critic and biographer, packs the text full of information with a light and witty touch. Each chapter places one of the theatres in Mackintosh's portfolio in the limelight – the Prince Edward, Prince of Wales, Novello, Wyndham's, Noël Coward, Gielgud, Victoria Palace and Sondheim – and explores how the productions they have housed, and the people who have worked in them throughout the decades, have influenced their development and the characteristics that make each one a unique addition to the West End landscape.

The text is bountifully accompanied with production photos, floor plans, architectural details, interior and exterior shots, sketches and posters from the archives. Yet while it's Mackintosh's name on the marquee, interior designer Clare Ferraby emerges as the brains behind the visually opulent and historically appropriate concepts, comprising the plasterwork, carpets, gilding, stained glass, light fixtures and other details that adorn the venues.

Each chapter concludes with a reverential tribute to Mackintosh – a figure of immense influence who, with Lloyd Webber, has turned musicals into international brands. This coffee table book would make a lovely gift, yet is also a serious reference resource and filled with details to look out for on your next visit to a Delfont Mackintosh theatre.

Julia Rank

Out for Blood: A Cultural History of Carrie the Musical

Chris Adams

Paperback, 265 pages

> "There are no Carrie secrets left unshared, making this a real page-turner – just like the Stephen King original"

Bloomsbury

PUBLISHED 27 JULY 2023

Carrie. There has never been a musical like her. Even the show's creators – Lawrence D Cohen, Dean Pitchford and Michael Gore – would agree. Reflecting on their first workshop, they concede it 'would be the last time [they'd] see [the] show the way we'd initially intended'.

Alas, Stephen King's high school horror about a 16-year-old's tragic prom night didn't translate theatrically. After just 16 previews and five performances, *Carrie*'s short-lived 1988 Broadway run earned 'ultimate flop' status. So why then, 35 years later, is *Carrie* suddenly experiencing a surprise cultural resurgence?

Following his (and Holly Morgan's) 10-part *Out for Blood* podcast, Chris Adams's tome delves deep into *Carrie* lore, unpacking everything from Playbills to plywood, and arguments to artistic ambition. Each chapter explores a different stage in this musical's life, cataloguing every moment to illuminate what really happened behind all the blood.

Don't solely take Adams's word though: a 50-strong cohort of creatives and fans also share their personal experiences of *Carrie*. In particular, I enjoyed *Be More Chill* creator Joe Iconis's first encounter with *Carrie* and the full-circle moments he had with Betty Buckley (who played her mother Margaret). If a book could catapult you into a rehearsal room from your own home, then *Out for Blood* would have you watching in the front row.

There are no *Carrie* secrets left unshared either, making this a real page-turner, just like the King original. In this behind-the-scenes coverage, you'll learn all about the crucial misunderstandings between creatives that meant conversations likening *Carrie* to *Grease* were misheard as 'Greece', as well as a string of unlucky moments that plagued any likelihood of success. Plus, there are untold stories from the original Carrie White – Linzi Hateley (read our interview with her on page 16) – as she reflects on being the RSC's youngest leading lady at 17.

Adams's comprehensive text is both approachable and teeming with information. The *Carrie* fandom will love unpicking every line over two chapters of song-by-song descriptions – I'd recommend playing the soundtrack as you read, for an immersive experience. Meanwhile, readers searching for general knowledge will learn about the legend of Carrie White without being overwhelmed.

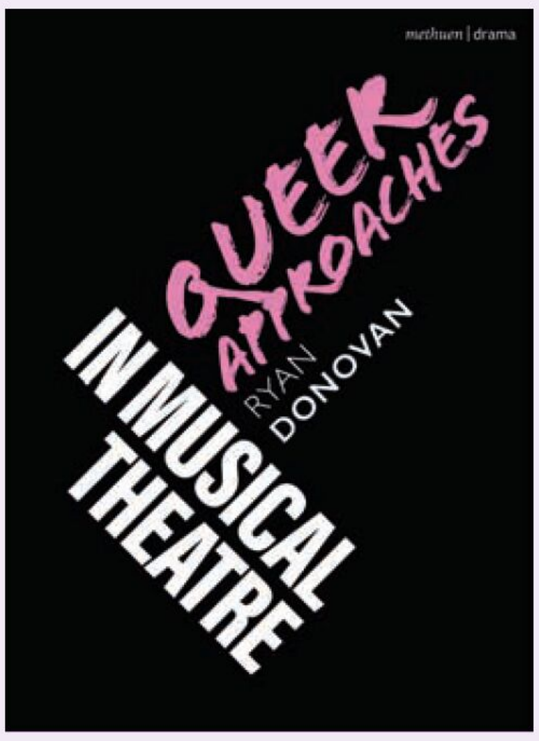
Ironically, though, *Out for Blood* is never out for blood; that's why Adams's text will

surely live on in the theatre community and beyond. By analysing *Carrie* through its enduring fan culture, it actually spins the traditional 'flop' narrative, instead celebrating the musical for its artistic courage and bravery to highlight that the show was simply ahead of its time.

Sophie Thomas

Queer Approaches in Musical Theatre

Ryan Donovan
Paperback, 136 pages



"The book charts the representation of queer characters, attitudes and coding through theatre history"

Methuen Drama
PUBLISHED 27 JULY 2023

This new volume by Ryan Donovan examines the impact and interpretation of Musical Theatre from a queer perspective. We're not talking about sequin-studded episodes of Busby Berkeley camp here – well, not just that.

Instead, Donovan's book charts the representation of queer characters, attitudes and coding through theatre history. These range from the offstage characters whose lives are alluded to but never seen in early 1930s musical comedies to openly queer characters and situations in musicals such as *Rent*, *Falsettos* and *A Strange Loop*.

Although Donovan's approach is more academic than emotive, it does prompt the reader to think about how queer representation has evolved – and still is evolving – within the genre.

Kander and Ebb's musical *Cabaret* is used as a case in point, exploring the gradual tweaking of the show from the 1966 Broadway premiere to the 1972 Fosse movie and then the 1993 Donmar production starring Alan Cumming.

Each version adapts the script and production style to edge closer toward a queer-centric, decadent Weimar cabaret style. It's the type of show that would never have been allowed in the mid-1960s, when *Fiddler on the Roof* and *Hello, Dolly!* were notching up record audiences.

Understandably there is a major nod to the Aids crisis, which tragically cut a swathe through so many practitioners both on Broadway and in the West End. Donovan examines how the period has been commemorated within Musical Theatre – most notably but not solely through Jonathan Larson's ground-breaking 1996 musical *Rent*.

It's also fascinating to observe the different attitudes globally to Jerry Herman's ground-breaking 1983 *La Cage aux Folles* [see the August/September issue for our feature on this landmark musical]. The show garnered great critical and commercial acclaim on Broadway, winning six Tony Awards. It is believed, however, that homophobia and public ignorance around the Aids pandemic may well have led to the musical's initial failure in the UK and Australia.

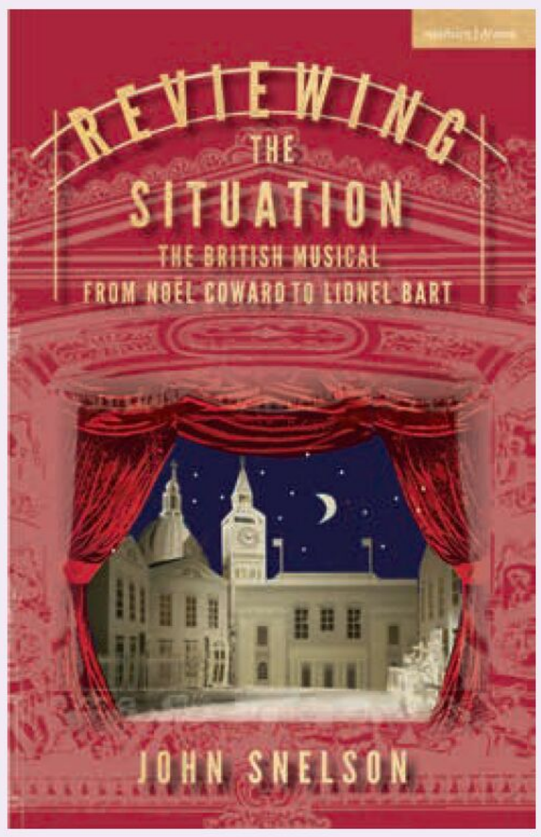
Donovan's almost forensic study of the construction of Lisa Kron and Jeanine Tesori's *Fun Home*, which follows a lesbian protagonist on her complex coming-out journey, not only lends insight into the development process but also how Musical Theatre – good Musical Theatre – can push the boundaries of both form and content.

Queer Approaches in Musical Theatre may not offer any absolute solutions to unlocking queerness in musicals, but it does push the reader to explore beyond the text and score. Donovan's scrupulous breakdown of history, text, production and public reception makes this a must-read for any director or producer considering a revival, whether the production is considered queer or not.

Paul Vale

Reviewing the Situation: The British Musical from Noël Coward to Lionel Bart

John Snelson
Hardcover, 208 pages



"Snelson uses a 3D analysis to piece these forgotten shows together; he must have had fun in the archives"

Bloomsbury
PUBLISHED 5 OCTOBER 2023

Reviewing the Situation is based on musicologist and cultural historian John Snelson's PhD on British Musical Theatre. An eloquently written and rigorously researched academic book with a hefty price tag (such is the nature of academic publishing), it explores a mix of well-known and 'forgotten' repertoire through its historical and social context – and, along the way, disproves some prevailing myths.

The book comprises seven case studies over three decades: Noël Coward's *Bitter Sweet* (1929), Noel Gay's *Me and My Girl* (1937), Ivor Novello and Christopher Hassall's *The Dancing Years* (1939), Vivian Ellis and AP Herbert's *Bless the Bride* (1947), Sandy Wilson's *The Boy Friend* (1953), *Expresso Bongo* (1958) by David Heneker, Wolf Mankowitz, Julian More, Monty Norman *et al*, and Lionel Bart's *Oliver!* (1960). As Snelson explains: 'All arose from the recognition of a good idea that suited a time and a place and an audience.'

It isn't easy accessing many of these shows today, as film versions tend to be bowdlerised, and often only excerpts of the scores were recorded. When Stephen Fry and Mike Ockrent revised *Me and My Girl* in 1985, there was no fixed version of the original book to refer to (not unusual with musical comedy of this period).

Snelson employs a multi-faceted '3D' analysis through music, dramaturgy, design and technological and media dissemination to piece these works together, and must have had a lot of fun in the archives.

Apart from *Expresso Bongo*, all these shows were set in the past (though *The Dancing Years* is framed by the very contemporary Anschluss) and Snelson interrogates generalised ideas about 'nostalgia'.

Furthermore, British musicals are often unfavourably compared to their American counterparts, which Snelson argues isn't helpful as the context is so different. *Bless the Bride* opened in the West End at the same time as *Oklahoma!* and he explores the eclectic European influences found in the former in relation to the musical education that many theatregoers of the 1940s would have received.

As Snelson shrewdly comments: 'Canonical works often start as rebels and end up as the Establishment' – as exemplified by the way in which *Oliver!*, the most enduring of the seven, was 'impressionistic' in its original staging, while major revivals have attempted to imitate the scale and aesthetics of the lavish 1968 film.

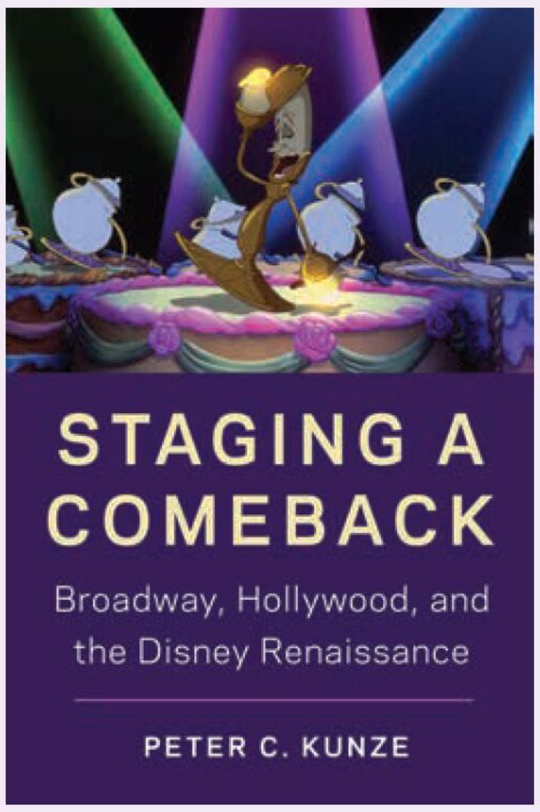
Snelson's depth of knowledge is surely unparalleled, and while this book is a touch too dense for armchair reading, it's a hugely valuable resource for students and academics that demonstrates how British Musical Theatre has always had a talent to amuse *and* to innovate.

Julia Rank

Staging a Comeback: Broadway, Hollywood and the Disney Renaissance

Peter C Kunze

Hardcover, 222 pages



> “Howard Ashman returned to the great Broadway musical in his animated films”

Rutgers University Press

PUBLISHED 15 SEPTEMBER 2023

In this detailed, meticulously researched book, Peter C Kunze maps the rise of the new Disney pre-eminence through the corporate politics of management and the changing landscape of entertainment. The latter was transformed by audiences starting to purchase video cassettes, altering viewing habits amid the rebirth of the great animated movie musicals that harkened back to Disney's golden age.

Kunze focuses on 1982-98. He defines the state of Broadway and Hollywood before Howard Ashman and Alan Menken's 1989 masterpiece, *The Little Mermaid*, which launched the new era of Disney animated musicals: *Beauty and the Beast, Aladdin* and *The Lion King*. The success of these films led to Disney's expansion into live theatre. The company restored the only Art Nouveau landmark on 42nd Street, the New Amsterdam Theatre, anchoring the revival of Broadway's main street with live productions of the movies that soon spread worldwide.

What I found most interesting was discovering the genesis of

PHOTOGRAPHY: Peter C Kunze

Disney's Aladdin was one of many mega movie hits to transfer to Broadway

The Little Mermaid, as I had had the privilege of composing new dance arrangements and additional score adaptation for the latest incarnation, Rob Marshall's 2023 live-action film. There's fascinating insight into how the late Ashman approached his work. He explains in an Indiana University lecture that 'film as a medium faces a challenge in carrying the songs that further the narrative, but the integrated musical, invested as it is in songs as storytelling devices, is better prepared to do so. Animation may be one of the last places where we'll continue to buy the use of music in a narrative format.'

By returning to the structure of the classic Broadway musical, Ashman paved the way for the great musical films that followed. He was, notes Kunze, 'invaluable to Jeffrey Katzenberg and Disney.'

Influences for *Beauty and the Beast* included *The King and I* and Jean Cocteau's magical film *La Belle et la Bête*. The discussion of how the characters were developed in these movies is most interesting, as is the explanation of how they were vocally cast.

The product licensing bonanzas for each film is also discussed. Disney management did not anticipate the great demand from *The Little Mermaid* – and never let that error in judgment happen again. Additionally, the success of the Disney Channel, and TV hits such as *The Golden Girls* and *Home Improvement*, are touched upon as the brand builds its great comeback.

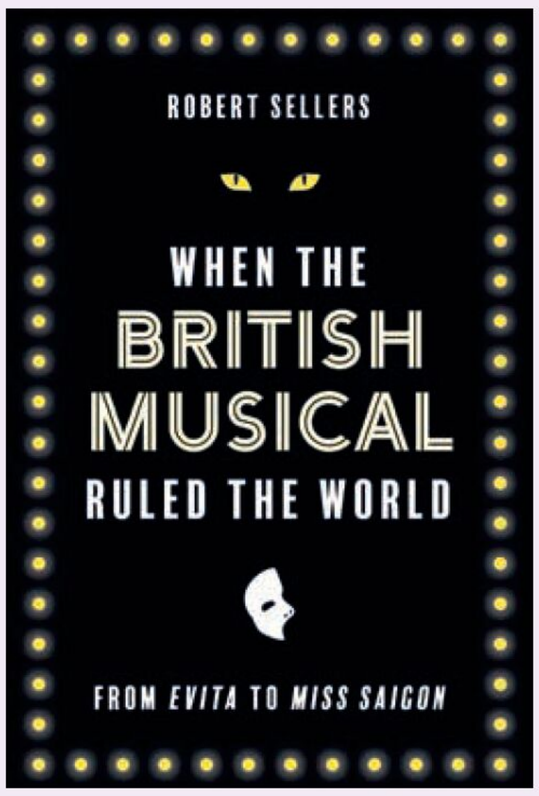
This excellent book is highly recommended for those interested in how the hugely consequential decisions were made that shaped Broadway, Hollywood and beyond.

David Krane

When the British Musical Ruled the World

Robert Sellers

Hardcover, 265 pages



> “Sellers gives us a sense of how megamusicals changed theatre – for better or worse”

Applause

PUBLISHED 1 AUGUST 2023

'Don't Cry For Me Argentina', 'Memory' and 'I Know Him So Well' all topped the popular music charts in the 1970s and 1980s. Coincidentally, Elaine Paige performed all three songs in the original casts of *Evita*, *Cats* and *Chess*. She led many productions in a new era of British megamusicals – the actors and the production were revered in equal measure. But how did this juggernaut form come to dominate the West End?

In Robert Sellers's fascinating work, readers can dive into the triumphs of seven iconic 20th-century musicals: *Evita, Cats, Starlight Express, Les Misérables, The Phantom of the Opera, Chess*, and *Miss Saigon*. Each chapter focuses on a blockbuster hit and is chock-full of facts and fascinating secrets behind industry-shaking creative collaborations. I'm still thinking about the heated taxi-ride conversation between Andrew Lloyd Webber and Cameron Mackintosh (no spoilers here).

To Sellers's credit, he doesn't ignore the failures either – a hologram of Laurence Olivier in *Metropolis*, anyone? By the end, recreational theatre fans and aficionados alike will have a newfound appreciation for world-class West End shows.

In the *Phantom* section, Sellers explores the rise of 'stan' or superfan culture; even if a show received poor reviews, people still camped overnight to get their hands on tickets because they 'trusted Andrew Lloyd Webber'. And, in the *Les Mis* and *Starlight Express* parts, you'll find out about the technological advancements that wowed new audiences, with creatives even knowingly adding unsanctioned methods into their shows (a shocking turn of illegal microphone usage in *Starlight Express* nearly put a stop to opening night!). He paints a vivid picture of an everchanging theatre landscape where a blend of creativity and commerce transformed British musicals.

Sellers's book places each show within the sociopolitical context of the time, allowing readers to understand their relative success while reflecting on modern-day issues. In particular, while the *Miss Saigon* section comments on its record-breaking four-year run and Jonathan Pryce and Lea Salonga's Olivier-winning performances, it also tackles the debates around whitewashing and a need for authentic storytelling. In doing so, he gives readers a sense of how megamusicals changed – and could still change – theatre, for better or worse.

Overall, Sellers's thoughtful work is an endearing tribute to a transformative era and a time that 'had never happened before in [musicals] and hasn't happened since'. Many of the shows and techniques discussed continue to be prevalent and to entertain large crowds every night. This book clarifies why we still hear the people sing.

Sophie Thomas

MUSICALS PODCAST

with Edward Seckerson

Join Edward Seckerson on our *Musicals* Podcast for exclusive interviews with stars of the stage & screen

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Your guide to upcoming Musical Theatre shows, concerts and cabaret performances across the UK, the US and internationally

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UK
London: West End, Off West End

ABBA Voyage
ABBA ARENA
Booking until 26 May 2024
abbavoyage.com

Back to the Future: The Musical
ADELPHI THEATRE
Booking until 11 Feb 2024
backtothefuturemusical.com

Bat Boy: The Musical
LONDON PALLADIUM
31 Oct 2023
lwtheatres.co.uk

The Book of Mormon
PRINCE OF WALES THEATRE
Booking until 30 Dec 2023
thebookofmormonmusical.com

Cabaret
PLAYHOUSE THEATRE (KIT KAT CLUB)
Booking until 29 Jun 2024
kitkat.club

The Choir of Man
ARTS THEATRE
Booking until 18 Feb 2024
choirofman.com

Close Up – The Twiggy Musical
MENIER CHOCOLATE FACTORY
Booking until 18 Nov 2023
menierchocolatefactory.com

CRAZY COQS
BRASSERIE ZEDEL

Kim Criswell, Takin' Stock 2: 30 Years Upon the Wicked Stages of Europe
6, 8 Oct 2023

Musicality
15 Oct 2023

Jim Caruso's Cast Party with Billy Stritch at the Piano
15, 16 Nov 2023

A Musical Night Out With Billy Stritch
16 Nov 2023

The Crazy Coqs Presents: Sooz Of The World 'Sooz Kempner Live in Cabaret'
26 Nov 2023

Broadway Meets West End Christmas Special with Lorna Want
27 Nov 2023

brasseriezedel.com

Crazy for You
GILLIAN LYNNE THEATRE
Booking until 20 Jan 2024
crazyforyoumusical.com

Disney in Concert: The Sound of Magic
LONDON COLISEUM
6 Nov 2023
londoncoliseum.org

Elf
DOMINION THEATRE
15 Nov 2023 – 6 Jan 2024
elflondon.com

Grease
DOMINION THEATRE
Booking until 28 Oct 2023
greasemusical.co.uk

Faking Bad
TURBINE THEATRE
5-28 Oct 2023
theturbinethetheatre.com

Flowers For Mrs Harris
RIVERSIDE STUDIOS
30 Sep – 26 Nov 2023
riversidestudios.co.uk

The Foreigners' Panto
BOLD ELEPHANT
3-28 Oct 2023
boldtheatre.com

Frozen
THEATRE ROYAL DRURY LANE
Booking until Jun 2024
frozenthemusical.co.uk

Guys & Dolls
BRIDGE THEATRE
Booking until 24 Feb 2024
bridgetheatre.co.uk

Hamilton
VICTORIA PALACE THEATRE
Booking until 2 Mar 2024
hamiltonmusical.com

Jersey Boys
TRAFALGAR THEATRE
Booking until 28 Jan 2024
jerseyboysmusical.co.uk

Kin
THEATRO TECHNIS
1-4 Nov 2023
kinthemusical.com

Les Misérables
SONDHEIM THEATRE
Booking until 2 Mar 2024
lesmis.com

The Lion King
LYCEUM THEATRE
Booking until 11 Feb 2024
thelionking.co.uk

The Little Big Things
@SOHOPLACE
Booking until 25 Nov 2023
sohoplace.org

Lizzie
SOUTHWARK PLAYHOUSE ELEPHANT
26 Oct – 2 Dec 2023
southwarkplayhouse.co.uk

Mamma Mia!
NOVELLO THEATRE
Booking until 28 Sep 2024
mamma-mia.com

Mamma Mia! The Party
THE O2
Booking until 3 Mar 2024
mammamiatheparty.co.uk

Matilda The Musical
CAMBRIDGE THEATRE
Booking until 15 Dec 2024
matildathemusical.com

Manic Street Creature
SOUTHWARK PLAYHOUSE BOROUGH
19 Oct – 11 Nov 2023
southwarkplayhouse.co.uk

Dining and disco: the immersive Mamma Mia! The Party experience at the O2

Moulin Rouge! The Musical
PICCADILLY THEATRE
Booking until 20 Jan 2024
moulinrougemusical.co.uk

Mrs Doubtfire The Musical
SHAFTESBURY THEATRE
Booking until 2 Jun 2024
mrsdoubtfiremusical.co.uk

Music for Youth Proms
ROYAL ALBERT HALL
14-15 Nov 2023
mfy.org.uk

My Neighbour Totoro
BARBICAN THEATRE
21 Nov 2023 – 23 Mar 2024
barbican.org.uk

Next to Normal
DONMAR WAREHOUSE
Booking until 7 Oct 2023
donmarwarehouse.com

Oh What a Lovely War
SOUTHWARK PLAYHOUSE BOROUGH
21 Nov – 9 Dec 2023
southwarkplayhouse.co.uk

Operation Mincemeat
FORTUNE THEATRE
Booking until 24 Feb 2024
operationmincemeat.com

Pacific Overtures
MENIER CHOCOLATE FACTORY
25 Nov 2023 – 24 Feb 2024
menierchocolatefactory.com

The Phantom of the Opera
HIS MAJESTY'S THEATRE
Booking until 2 Mar 2024
thephantomoftheopera.com

Police Cops: The Musical
SOUTHWARK PLAYHOUSE BOROUGH
Booking until 14 Oct 2023
southwarkplayhouse.co.uk

PIZZAEXPRESS LIVE

Nina Kristofferson Sings Billie Holiday
THE PHEASANTRY
29 Sep 2023

What Would Julie Do?
THE PHEASANTRY
1 Oct 2023

Julie Ross Celebrates Rodgers & Hart
THE PHEASANTRY
4 Oct 2023

Sunday Afternoon at the Musicals
PIZZA EXPRESS LIVE, HOLBORN
8 Oct 2023

Steve Ross Sings Cole Porter: From List To Lust
THE PHEASANTRY
13-15 Oct 2023

Nathan Martin & Evelyn Hoskins: 'Let Me Sing... Open Mic Night'
THE PHEASANTRY
17 Oct 2023

Autumn in London With The Rat Pack
PIZZA EXPRESS LIVE, HOLBORN
17 Oct 2023

PHOTOGRAPHY: Grant Walker / Alex Harvey-Brown

'The Musicals Collection' with Denmark Street Big Band
PIZZA EXPRESS LIVE, HOLBORN
22 Oct 2023

Andrea Marcovicci
THE PHEASANTRY
22 Oct 2023

Claire Martin Returns in 'Remembering Richard'
THE PHEASANTRY
27-28 Oct 2023

KT Sullivan 'A Celebration'
THE PHEASANTRY
30-31 Oct 2023

Sunday Afternoon at the Musicals
PIZZA EXPRESS LIVE, HOLBORN
5 Nov 2023

Nathan Martin & Will Barratt: 'Let Me Sing... Open Mic Night'
THE PHEASANTRY
21 Nov 2023

Ann Hampton Callaway – Finding Beauty: Inspired Classics and Originals
THE PHEASANTRY
22-25 Nov 2023

pizzaexpresslive.com

Rebecca
CHARING CROSS THEATRE
Booking until 18 Nov 2023
charingcrosstheatre.co.uk

Showstopper! The Improvised Musical
CAMBRIDGE THEATRE
Booking until 18 Dec 2023
showstopperthemusical.com

SIX
VAUDEVILLE THEATRE
Booking until 3 Nov 2024
sixthemusical.com

Stephen Sondheim's Old Friends
GIELGUD THEATRE
Booking until 6 Jan 2024
sondheimoldfriends.com

Sunset Boulevard
SAVOY THEATRE
Booking until 6 Jan 2024
sunsetboulevardwestend.com

The Time Traveller's Wife: The Musical
ALDWYCH THEATRE
7 Oct 2023 – 30 Mar 2024
timetravellerswife.com

Tina: The Tina Turner Musical
APOLLO THEATRE
Booking until 12 Feb 2024
tinathemusical.com

Treason The Musical
ALEXANDRA PALACE
8-18 Nov 2023
treasonthemusical.com

Trompe L'Oeil
THE OTHER PALACE
Booking until 15 Oct 2023
theotherpalace.co.uk

West End Musical Halloween
LYRIC THEATRE
29 Oct 2024
westendmusicalhalloween.co.uk

A new staging of Tim Firth and Gary Barlow's Calendar Girls The Musical, based on the 2003 film, is back out on the road

Wicked
APOLLO VICTORIA THEATRE
Booking until 2 Jun 2024
wickedthemusical.co.uk

The Witches
NATIONAL THEATRE, OLIVIER
7 Nov 2023 – 27 Jan 2024
nationaltheatre.org.uk

Touring: Major Shows

42nd Street
MAYFLOWER THEATRE, Southampton, 3-7 Oct
THEATRE ROYAL, Newcastle, 10-14 Oct
OPERA HOUSE, Manchester, 16-21 Oct
GRAND OPERA HOUSE, Belfast, 24-28 Oct
42ndstreettour.com

ADHD: The Musical
THE CUBE, Bristol, 12 Oct
THE PYRAMID, Warrington, 13 Oct
CAMDEN PEOPLE'S THEATRE, London, 17-28 Oct
doraviolet.co.uk/tour

Aladdin
PLAYHOUSE, Edinburgh, 24 Oct – 19 Nov
aladdinthemusical.co.uk

Annie
OPERA HOUSE, Manchester, Booking until 30 Sep
EMPIRE, Sunderland, 2-7 Oct
GRAND THEATRE, Wolverhampton, 10-14 Oct
LYCEUM THEATRE, Sheffield, 17-21 Oct
NEW THEATRE, Hull, 23-28 Oct
GRAND OPERA HOUSE, Belfast, 31 Oct – 4 Nov
NEW WIMBLEDON THEATRE, London, 7-11 Nov
HAWTH THEATRE, Crawley, 12-18 Nov
HIPPODROME THEATRE, Bristol, 20-25 Nov
anniethemusicaltour.uk

Blood Brothers
STORYHOUSE, Chester, Booking until 2 Oct
KING'S THEATRE, Glasgow, 5-9 Oct
PLAYHOUSE, Edinburgh, 12-16 Oct
ALHAMBRA, Bradford, 19-23 Oct
THEATRE SEVERN, Shrewsbury, 26-30 Oct
HIPPODROME, Birmingham, 2-13 Nov
EVERYMAN, Cheltenham, 16-20 Nov
NEW VICTORIA THEATRE, Woking, 23-27 Nov
kenwright.com

Branwen: Dadeni
DONALD GORDON THEATRE, Wales Millennium Centre, Cardiff, 8-11 Nov
ARTS CENTRE, Aberystwyth, 15-17 Nov
PONTIO, Bangor, 22-25 Nov
franwen.com/en/productions/branwen

The Bodyguard
GRAND OPERA HOUSE, Belfast, Booking until 30 Sep
EDEN COURT, Glasgow, 3-7 Oct
LYCEUM THEATRE, Sheffield, 10-14 Oct
CONGRESS THEATRE, Eastbourne, 16-21 Oct
NEW VICTORIA THEATRE, Woking, 23-28 Oct
MAYFLOWER THEATRE, Southampton, 30 Oct – 4 Nov
WINTER GARDENS, Blackpool, 6-11 Nov
HALL FOR CORNWALL, Truro, 14-18 Nov
NEW THEATRE, Oxford, 27 Nov – 2 Dec
thebodyguardmusical.com

The Book Thief
CURVE, Leicester
Booking until 14 Oct
thebookthiefmusical.com

Buddy – The Buddy Holly Story
NEW THEATRE, Peterborough, Booking until 30 Sep
QUEEN'S THEATRE, Barnstaple, 3-7 Oct
NEW THEATRE ROYAL, Lincoln, 9-11 Oct
HAWTH THEATRE, Crawley, 13-14 Oct
buddythemusical.com

Calendar Girls
EVERYMAN THEATRE, Cheltenham, Booking until 30 Sep
ALEXANDRA THEATRE, Birmingham, 3-7 Oct
EMPIRE, LIVERPOOL, 10-14 Oct
MILTON KEYNES THEATRE, 17-21 Oct
NEW THEATRE, Peterborough, 24-28 Oct
NEW WIMBLEDON THEATRE, London, 31 Oct – 4 Nov
GRAND THEATRE, Leeds, 7-11 Nov
REGENT THEATRE, Stoke-On-Trent, 14-18 Nov
HIPPODROME, Darlington, 21-25 Nov
NEW THEATRE, Hull, 28 Nov – 2 Dec
kenwright.com

Charlie and the Chocolate Factory
BRISTOL HIPPODROME, Booking until 8 Oct
HIPPODROME, Birmingham, 17 Oct – 5 Nov
EMPIRE, Liverpool, 8-26 Nov
charlieandthechocolatefactory.co.uk

Dirty Dancing
WINTER GARDENS, Blackpool, Booking until 7 Oct
ALHAMBRA, Bradford, 10-14 Oct
HIS MAJESTY'S THEATRE, Aberdeen, 17-21 Oct
KINGS THEATRE, Glasgow, 24-28 Oct
MARLOWE THEATRE, Canterbury, 31 Oct – 4 Nov
NEW THEATRE, Hull, 7-18 Nov
dirtydancingonstage.co.uk

The Drifters Girl
LYCEUM, Sheffield, Booking until 30 Sep
ALHAMBRA, Bradford, 3-7 Oct
OPERA HOUSE, Manchester, 10-14 Oct
MARLOWE THEATRE, Canterbury, 17-21 Oct
MILTON KEYNES THEATRE, 24-28 Oct
CURVE, Leicester, 31 Oct – 4 Nov
CLIFFS PAVILION, Southend, 7-11 Nov
THEATRE ROYAL, Newcastle, 14-18 Nov
NEW VICTORIA THEATRE, Woking, 21-25 Nov
ORCHARD THEATRE, Dartford, 28 Nov – 2 Dec
thedriftersgirl.com

Everybody's Talking About Jamie
THEATRE ROYAL, Nottingham, Booking until 30 Sep
CHURCHILL THEATRE, Bromley, 2-7 Oct
HIPPODROME, Birmingham, 9-14 Oct
WALES MILLENNIUM CENTRE, Cardiff, 23-28 Oct
THEATRE ROYAL, Brighton, 31 Oct – 11 Nov
GRAND THEATRE, Leeds, 14-19 Nov
WINTER GARDENS, Blackpool, 21-25 Nov
VENUE CYMRU, Llandudno, 28 Nov – 2 Dec
everybodystalkingaboutjamie.co.uk

The company of Sister Act The Musical, currently on tour in the UK and Ireland

The Good Enough Mums Club
HIPPODROME, Birmingham, **25-29 Oct**
STORYHOUSE, Chester, **2-4 Nov**
PLAYHOUSE, Norwich, **9-11 Nov**
PERFORMING ARTS CENTRE, Lincoln, **16-17 Nov**
MAST MAYFLOWER STUDIOS, Southampton, **22-23 Nov**
THE LOWRY, Salford, **20 Nov – 2 Dec**
goodenoughmumsclub.com

Greatest Days: The Official Take That Musical
MAYFLOWER THEATRE, Southampton, **Booking until 30 Sep**
ROYAL & DERNGATE, Northampton, **2-7 Oct**
THEATRE ROYAL, Brighton, **9-14 Oct**
HALL FOR CORNWALL, Truro, **17-21 Oct**
CURVE THEATRE, Leicester, **23-28 Oct**
NEW THEATRE, Hull, **30 Oct – 4 Nov**
WATERSIDE THEATRE, Aylesbury, **7-11 Nov**
EMPIRE, Sunderland, **14-18 Nov**
GRAND THEATRE AND OPERA HOUSE, Leeds, **21-25 Nov**
greatestdaysmusical.com

Heathers The Musical
NEW THEATRE, Hull, **Booking until 30 Sep**
HIPPODROME, Darlington, **3-7 Oct**
YVONNE ARNAUD THEATRE, Guildford, **17-21 Oct**
NEW WIMBLEDON THEATRE, London, **24-28 Oct**
THEATRE ROYAL, Windsor, **31 Oct – 4 Nov**
heathersthemusical.com

I Should Be So Lucky
OPERA HOUSE, Manchester, **2-25 Nov**
WALES MILLENNIUM CENTRE, Cardiff, **27 Nov – 2 Dec**
soluckymusical.com

Jesus Christ Superstar
THEATRE ROYAL, Newcastle, **Booking until 30 Sep**
NEW THEATRE, Hull, **2-7 Oct**
HIS MAJESTY'S THEATRE, Aberdeen, **10-14 Oct**
KING'S THEATRE, Glasgow, **16-21 Oct**
EMPIRE, Liverpool, **23-28 Oct**
MILTON KEYNES THEATRE, **30 Oct – 4 Nov**
THEATRE ROYAL, Plymouth, **6-11 Nov**
GRAND THEATRE, Wolverhampton, **14-18 Nov**
ALHAMBRA THEATRE, Bradford, **27 Nov – 2 Dec**
jesuschristsuperstar.com

The King and I
NEW VICTORIA THEATRE, Woking, **Booking until 30 Sep**
NEW THEATRE, Oxford, **3-7 Oct**
THEATRE ROYAL, Nottingham, **17-21 Oct**
HIS MAJESTY'S THEATRE, Aberdeen, **24-28 Oct**
GRAND THEATRE, Leeds, **31 Oct – 4 Nov**
MILTON KEYNES THEATRE, **7-11 Nov**
NORWICH THEATRE, **14-18 Nov**
NEW THEATRE, Cardiff, **21-25 Nov**
kingandimusical.co.uk

La Bamba!
BELGRADE THEATRE, Coventry, **26-30 Sep**
REGENT THEATRE, Stoke-On-Trent, **3-7 Oct**
NEW THEATRE, Cardiff, **10-15 Oct**
PRINCESS THEATRE, Torquay, **17-21 Oct**
WYVERN THEATRE, Swindon, **24-28 Oct**
ORCHARD THEATRE, Dartford, **31 Oct – 4 Nov**
GRAND OPERA HOUSE, York, **7-11 Nov**
GRAND THEATRE, Blackpool, **21-25 Nov**
labambaonstage.co.uk

The Lion King
BORD GÁIS ENERGY THEATRE, Dublin, **Booking until 11 Nov**
thelionking.co.uk

Madagascar The Musical
THEATRE ROYAL, Plymouth, **20-28 Oct**
EVERYMAN THEATRE, Cheltenham, **31 Oct – 4 Nov**
NEW THEATRE, Peterborough, **8-11 Nov**
WATERSIDE THEATRE, Aylesbury, **15-18 Nov**
EMPIRE, Sunderland, **22-25 Nov**
madagascarontour.com

Oh What a Lovely War
THEATRE ROYAL, Bury St Edmunds, **Booking until 30 Sep**
ROYAL & DERNGATE Northampton, **2-3 Oct**
EM FORSTER THEATRE, Tonbridge, **4-5 Oct**
HEMSTED PARK, Cranbrook, **7 Oct**
PALACE THEATRE, Mansfield, **11 Oct**
THE THEATRE, Chipping Norton, **12-14 Oct**
THEATRE ROYAL, Winchester, **16-18 Oct**
HAYMARKET, Basingstoke, **19-21 Oct**
DEVONSHIRE PARK THEATRE, Eastbourne, **31 Oct – 4 Nov**
STAHL THEATRE, OUNDLE, **7-8 Nov**
ARTSDEPOT, Finchley, **9-11 Nov**
WATERSIDE ARTS, Sale, **14-15 Nov**
THE CORO, ULVERSTON, **16-17 Nov**
SOUTHWARK PLAYHOUSE BOROUGH, London, **21 Nov – 9 Dec**
blackeyedtheatre.co.uk

Pretty Woman
ALEXANDRA THEATRE, Birmingham, **17-28 Oct**
HIPPODROME, Bristol, **31 Oct – 11 Nov**
THEATRE ROYAL, Glasgow, **14-25 Nov**
NEW VICTORIA THEATRE, Woking, **27 Nov – 2 Dec**
london.prettywomanthemusical.com/tour

The Rocky Horror Show
ALHAMBRA THEATRE, Bradford, **Booking until 30 Sep**
REGENT THEATRE, Ipswich, **2-7 Oct**
NEW THEATRE, Hull, **9-14 Oct**
rockyhorror.co.uk

Shrek The Musical
NEW WIMBLEDON THEATRE, London, **Booking until 30 Sep**
ROYAL & DERNGATE, Northampton, **10-15 Oct**
CURVE THEATRE, Leicester, **17-21 Oct**
ALHAMBRA THEATRE, Bradford, **24-28 Oct**
NEW VICTORIA THEATRE, Woking, **30 Oct – 4 Nov**
CONGRESS THEATRE, Eastbourne, **13-18 Nov**
WALES MILLENNIUM CENTRE, Cardiff, **20-25 Nov**
GRAND OPERA HOUSE, York, **27 Nov – 2 Dec**
shrekuktour.com

Sister Act The Musical
REGENT THEATRE, Stoke-On-Trent, **Booking until 30 Sep**
FESTIVAL THEATRE, Edinburgh, **2-7 Oct**
BELGRADE THEATRE, Coventry, **9-14 Oct**
EVERYMAN, Cheltenham, **16-28 Oct**
WALES MILLENNIUM CENTRE, Cardiff, **13-18 Nov**
ALHAMBRA THEATRE, Bradford, **20-25 Nov**
EMPIRE, Sunderland, **27 Nov – 2 Dec**
sisteractthemusical.co.uk

SIX
KING'S THEATRE, Portsmouth, **11-15 Oct**
EMBASSY THEATRE, Skegness, **24-28 Oct**
LIGHTHOUSE, Poole, **31 Oct – 12 Nov**
PRINCESS THEATRE, Torquay, **14-18 Nov**
THEATRE ROYAL, Nottingham, **21-26 Nov**
ROYAL & DERNGATE, Northampton, **28 Nov – 2 Dec**
sixthemusical.com

TONY! The Tony Blair Rock Opera
DEVONSHIRE PARK THEATRE, Eastbourne, **Booking until 30 Sep**
THE LOWRY, Salford, **2-7 Oct**
PLAYHOUSE, Liverpool, **10-14 Oct**
tonyblairrockopera.co.uk

Treason The Musical
FESTIVAL THEATRE, Edinburgh, **25-28 Oct**
LYCEUM, Sheffield, **31 Oct – 4 Nov**
ALEXANDRA PALACE, London, **8-18 Nov**
ORCHARD THEATRE, Dartford, **21-25 Nov**
treasonthemusical.com

Major Regional Theatres

Birmingham Repertory Theatre
Sinatra The Musical
Booking until 28 Oct
birminghamrep.co.uk

Bristol Hippodrome Theatre
Charlie and the Chocolate Factory
Booking until 8 Oct
Pretty Woman
31 Oct – 11 Nov
Annie
20-25 Nov
atgtickets.com

Bristol Old Vic
Kathy and Stella Solve a Murder!
Booking until 30 Sep
Choir Boy
12 Oct – 11 Nov
bristololdvic.org.uk

Curve Leicester
The Book Thief **Booking until 14 Oct**
Shrek The Musical **17-21 Oct**
Greatest Days **23-28 Oct**
The Drifters Girl **31 Oct – 4 Nov**
Evita **27 Nov – 13 Jan**
curveonline.co.uk

Festival Theatre, Pitlochry
Sunshine on Leith
17 Nov – 23 Dec
pitlochryfestivaltheatre.com

Grand Opera House, York
La Bamba!
7-11 Nov
Shrek The Musical
27 Nov – 2 Dec
atgtickets.com

Hope Mill Theatre, Manchester
Lizzie
Booking until 30 Sep
To Wong Foo The Musical
21 Oct – 17 Dec
hopemilltheatre.co.uk

King's Theatre, Glasgow
Jesus Christ Superstar
16-21 Oct
Dirty Dancing
24-28 Oct
ELF **14-18 Nov**
atgtickets.com

Leeds Playhouse
Oliver!
27 Nov – 27 Jan
leedsplayhouse.org.uk

Liverpool Empire
Calendar Girls **10-14 Oct**
Jesus Christ Superstar
23-28 Oct
Charlie and the Chocolate Factory
8-26 Nov
atgtickets.com

The Lowry, Salford
Tony! The Tony Blair Rock Opera
2-7 Oct
The Good Enough Mums Club
30 Nov – 2 Dec
thelowry.com

PHOTOGRAPHY: Mark Senior / Joan Marcus

Mayflower, Southampton
Greatest Days
Booking until 30 Sep
42nd Street
3-7 Oct
Stranger Sings!
14 Oct
The Bodyguard
30 Oct – 4 Nov
mayflower.org.uk

Mill at Sonning
High Society
29 Nov – 20 Jan 2024
millatsonning.com

Milton Keynes Theatre
Calendar Girls
17-21 Oct
The Drifters Girl
24-28 Oct
Jesus Christ Superstar
30 Oct – 4 Nov
The King and I
7-11 Nov
atgtickets.com

New Theatre, Oxford
The King and I
3-7 Oct
The Bodyguard
27 Nov – 2 Dec
atgtickets.com

New Wimbledon Theatre, London
Shrek
Booking until 30 Sep
Heathers
24-28 Oct
Calendar Girls
31 Oct – 4 Nov
Annie **7-11 Nov**
Fantastically Great Women Who Changed the World
30 Nov – 2 Dec
atgtickets.com

Norwich Theatre
Good Enough Mums Club (Playhouse)
9-11 Nov
The King and I (Theatre Royal)
14-18 Nov
norwichtheatre.org

Old Joint Stock Theatre, Birmingham
Alan Turing – A Musical Biography
5-7 Oct
Simply Barbra
25-26 Oct
oldjointstock.co.uk

Palace Theatre, Manchester
Hamilton
22 Nov – 24 Feb
atgtickets.com

Sheffield Lyceum
The Drifters Girl
Booking until 30 Sep
The Bodyguard
10-14 Oct
Annie **17-21 Oct**
Treason The Musical
31 Oct – 4 Nov
sheffieldtheatres.co.uk

Theatre Royal Plymouth
Islander
Booking until 7 Oct
Madagascar The Musical
20-28 Oct
Jesus Christ Superstar
6-11 Nov
theatreroyal.com

Watermill Theatre, Newbury
The Lord of the Rings
Booking until 15 Oct
watermill.org.uk

US
Broadway

& Juliet
STEPHEN SONDHEIM THEATRE
Booking until 21 Apr 2024
andjulietbroadway.com

Aladdin
NEW AMSTERDAM THEATRE
Booking until 10 Mar 2024
aladdinthemusical.com

Back to the Future: The Musical
WINTER GARDEN THEATRE
Booking until 25 Feb 2024
backtothefuturemusical.com/newyork

A Beautiful Noise: The Neil Diamond Musical
BROADHURST THEATRE
Booking until 2 Jun 2024
abeautifulnoisethemusical.com

The Book of Mormon
EUGENE O'NEILL THEATRE
Booking until 3 Mar 2024
bookofmormonbroadway.com

Chicago
AMBASSADOR THEATRE
Booking until 4 Feb 2024
chicagothemusical.com

Gutenberg! The Musical!
JAMES EARL JONES THEATRE
Booking until 28 Jan 2024
gutenbergbway.com

Hadestown
WALTER KERR THEATRE
Booking until 16 Jun 2024
hadestown.com

Hamilton
RICHARD RODGERS THEATRE
Booking until 2 Jun 2024
hamiltonmusical.com

Harmony
ETHEL BARRYMORE THEATRE
18 Oct 2023 – 1 Sep 2024
harmonyanewmusical.com

Here Lies Love
BROADWAY THEATRE
Booking until 7 Jan 2024
hereliveslovebroadway.com

How to Dance in Ohio
BELASCO THEATRE
15 Nov 2023 – 16 Jun 2024
howtodanceinohiomusical.com

Kimberly Akimbo
BOOTH THEATRE
Booking until 7 Jan 2024
kimberlyakimbothemusical.com

The Lion King
MINSKOFF THEATRE
Booking until 10 Mar 2024
lionking.com

Melissa Etheridge: My Window
CIRCLE IN THE SQUARE THEATRE
Booking until 19 Nov 2023
circlesquaretheatre.com

Merrily We Roll Along
HUDSON THEATRE
Booking until 24 Mar 2024
merrilyonbroadway.com

MJ The Musical
NEIL SIMON THEATRE
Booking until 21 Jan 2024
mjthemusical.com

Moulin Rouge! The Musical
AL HIRSCHFELD THEATRE
Booking until 25 Feb 2024
moulinrougemusical.com

Shucked
NEDERLANDER THEATRE
Booking until 7 Jul 2024
shuckedmusical.com

SIX
BROOKS ATKINSON THEATRE
Booking until 31 Mar 2024
sixonbroadway.com

Some Like It Hot
SHUBERT THEATRE
Booking until 14 Jan 2024
somelikeithotmusical.com

Spamalot
ST JAMES THEATRE
31 Oct 2023 – 28 Apr 2024
spamalotthemusical.com

Sweeney Todd
LUNT-FONTANNE THEATRE
Booking until 14 Jan 2024
sweeneytoddbroadway.com

Wicked
GERSHWIN THEATRE
Booking until 12 May 2024
wickedthemusical.com

Off Broadway

Anne Frank, A Musical
ACTORS TEMPLE THEATRE
11 Oct – 5 Nov 2023
actorstempletheatre.com

Buena Vista Social Club
ALLANTIC THEATER COMPANY
17 Nov – 31 Dec 2023
atlantictheatrer.com

Tony Award-winning Kimberly Akimbo is playing at Broadway's Booth Theatre

Friends! The Musical Parody
THEATRE CENTRE
Booking until 31 Mar 2024
thetheatrercenter.com

The Gardens of Anuncia
MITZI E NEWHOUSE THEATRE
19 Oct 2023 – 31 Dec 2023
lct.org

Here We Are
THE SHED
Booking until 7 Jan 2024
theshed.org

Hell's Kitchen
PUBLIC THEATRE
Booking until 7 Jan 2024
publictheater.org

I Can Get It For You Wholesale
CLASSIC STAGE COMPANY
24 Oct – 10 Dec 2023
classicstage.org

Little Shop of Horrors
WESTSIDE THEATRE
Booking until 5 Jan 2025
littleshopnyc.com

The Office! A Musical Parody!
THE THEATER CENTRE
Booking until 31 Mar 2024
theofficeoffbroadway.com

Pal Joey
NEW YORK CITY CENTRE
1-5 Nov 2023
nycitycenter.org

SAW The Musical
AMT THEATRE
Booking until 1 Jan 2024
sawthemusical.com

Sesame Street The Musical
THEATER 555
Booking until 29 Oct 2023
theater555.venuetix.com

Singfield! A Musical About Nothing!
THEATER 555
Booking until 31 Mar 2024
theatrercenter.com

South
SOHO PLAYHOUSE
6 Oct 2023
southmusical.com

Stereophonic
PLAYWRIGHTS HORIZONS
11 Oct – 19 Nov 2023
playwrightshorizons.org

Titanique: Une Parodie Musicale
DARYL ROTH THEATRE
Booking until 7 Jan 2024
titaniquemusical.com

True Crime: The Musical
PLAYERS THEATRE
Booking until 9 Dec 2023
theplayerstheatre.com

Walk On Through: Confessions Of A Museum Novice
MCC THEATRE SPACE
13 Nov – 10 Dec 2023
mcctheater.org

International

Aida
AFAS CIRCUSTHEATER
SCHEVENINGEN, The Hague
Booking until 31 Jan 2024
stage-entertainment.nl

Aladdin
TEATRO COLISEUM, Madrid
Booking until 31 Oct 2023
stage.es/musicales/Aladdin

Aladdin
DENTSU SHIKI THEATRE UMI, Tokyo
Booking until 30 Jun 2024
shiki.jp

Anastasia
TEATRO TELCEL, Mexico City
Booking until 30 Nov 2023
anastasiaelmusical.mx

Brigadoon
SHAW FESTIVAL THEATRE, Ontario
15 Nov – 23 Dec 2023
shawfest.com

Cats
NAGOYA SHIKI THEATRE, Nagoya
Booking until 12 May 2024
shiki.jp

Chicago
NATIONAL THEATRE CHEBANCA, Milan
5-29 Oct 2023
teatronanazionale.it

Dance of the Vampires
STAGE OPERETTENHAUS, Hamburg
8 Nov 2023 – 15 September 2024
stage-entertainment.de

Disney's Frozen
THEATRE AN DER ELBE Hamburg
Booking until 31 Aug 2024
stage-entertainment.de

Disney's Frozen
JR EAST SHIKI THEATER HARU, Tokyo
Booking until 30 Jun 2024
shiki.jp

Gypsy
SHAW FESTIVAL THEATRE, Ontario
Booking until 7 Oct 2023
shawfest.com

Hamilton
STATE OPERA, Hamburg
Booking until 15 Oct 2023
stage-entertainment.de

In Dreams
ED MIRVISH THEATRE, Toronto
Booking until 12 Nov 2023
toronto-theatre.com

Into the Woods
SINGTEL WATERFRONT THEATRE, Singapore
27 Oct – 12 Nov 2023
Pangdemonium.com

Jagged Little Pill
PRINCESS OF WALES THEATRE, Toronto
28 Oct – 26 Nov 2023
toronto-theatre.com

The Lion King
MOGADOR THEATRE, Paris
Booking until 5 May 2024
theatremogador.com

The Lion King
THEATER IM HAFEN, Hamburg
Booking until 22 Dec 2024
stage-entertainment.de

The Lion King
THEATRO LOPE DE VEGA, Madrid
Booking until 3 Dec 2023
stage.es/musicales/el-rey-leon

The Lion King
ARIAKE SHIKI THEATRE, Tokyo
Booking until 30 Jun 2024
shiki.jp

Mrs Doubtfire is one of the musicals offering access and relaxed performances

The Little Mermaid
HIGASHI 1-CHOME THEATER, Sapporo, Hokkaido
Booking until 26 Nov 2023
shiki.jp

Mamma Mia!
STAGE THEATER NEUE FLORA, Hamburg
Booking until 21 Jan 2024
stage-entertainment.de

Mamma Mia!
RIALTO THEATER, Madrid
Booking until 3 Dec 2023
mammamiaelmusical.es

Mamma Mia!
CASINO DE PARIS, Paris
21 Oct 2023 – 21 Jan 2024
mammamia-lemusical.com

Mary Poppins
CROWN THEATRE, Perth
Booking until 22 Oct 2023
marypoppinsmusical.com.au

Pretty Woman The Musical
TEATRO EDP GRAN VIA, Madrid
Booking until 3 Dec 2023
prettywomanelmusical.com

Pretty Woman The Musical
BEATRIX THEATRE, Utrecht
Booking until 30 Dec 2023
stage-entertainment.nl

Romeo & Juliet – Love is Everything
THEATRE DES WESTENS, Berlin
Booking until 4 Jan 2024
stage-entertainment.de

SIX
ROYAL ALEXANDRA THEATRE, Toronto
Booking until 17 Dec 2023
toronto-theatre.com

Spamalot
THÉÂTRE DE PARIS, Paris
Booking until 28 Apr 2024
theatredeparis.com

Starlight Express
STARLIGHT-EXPRESS-THEATRE, Bochum
Booking until 31 Mar 2024
starlight-express.de

Tarzan
STAGE PALLADIUM THEATRE, Stuttgart
8 Nov 2023 – 22 Sep 2024
stage-entertainment.de

Tina: The Tina Turner Musical
STAGE APOLLO THEATRE, Stuttgart
Booking until 28 Jan 2024
stage-entertainment.de

Tina: The Tina Turner Musical
THEATRE ROYAL, Sydney
Booking until 31 Dec 2023
tinathemusical.com.au

Access and relaxed performances (UK)

Annie
Sheffield Lyceum
Audio described, signed: **19 Oct, 7:15pm**
Captioned: **21 Oct, 3pm**

The Bodyguard
Sheffield Lyceum
Audio described, signed: **12 Oct, 7:45pm**
Captioned: **14 Oct, 3pm**

Crazy for You
Gillian Lynne Theatre
BSL interpreted: **17 Nov, 7:30pm**
Captioned: **24 Nov, 7:30pm**
Audio described: **22 Nov, 7:30pm**

The Drifters Girl
Sheffield Lyceum
Captioned: **30 Sep, 3pm**

Frozen
Theatre Royal Drury Lane
Audio described: **available on all performances**

Guys & Dolls
Bridge Theatre
Audio described and touch tour: **18 Nov, 2:30pm**

Hamilton
Victoria Palace Theatre
Audio described: **7 Oct, 2:30pm**

Jersey Boys
Trafalgar Theatre
Audio described: **2 Oct, 7:30pm**
Captioned: **13 Nov, 7:30pm**

The Little Big Things
@sohoplace
BSL interpreted: **18 Oct, 7:30pm**
Audio described: **27 Oct, 2:30pm**
Captioned: **9 Nov, 7:30pm**

The Lord of the Rings
Watermill Theatre
Captioned & BSL Interpreted: **8 Oct, 2:30pm**
Audio described: **7 Oct, 2pm**
Relaxed: **1 Oct, 2:30pm**

Mamma Mia!
Novello Theatre
Captioned: **4 Feb 2024, 1:30pm**
Audio described: **25 Feb 2024, 2:30pm**

Matilda
Cambridge Theatre
Captioned: **4 Oct, 2pm; 25 Nov, 2:30pm**
Audio described: **4 Oct, 2pm; 19 Nov, 3pm (touch tours two hours before),**
Signed: **18 Nov, 2:30pm**
Chilled: **3 Nov, 3pm**

Mrs Doubtfire The Musical
Shaftesbury Theatre
Relaxed: **20 Jan 2024, 2:30pm**

Operation Mincemeat
Fortune Theatre
Captioned: **21 Oct, 3pm; 30 Oct, 7:30pm**

The Phantom of the Opera
His Majesty's Theatre
Captioned: **14 Oct, 2pm, 2:30pm**

SIX
Vaudeville Theatre
Audio described: **4 Nov, 4pm; 28 Apr 2024, 4pm**
Captioned: **18 Nov, 4pm; 21 Apr 2024, 4pm**
BSL interpreted: **12 Nov, 4pm; 13 Apr 2024, 4pm**

Stephen Sondheim's Old Friends
Gielgud Theatre
Audio described: **11 Nov, 2:30pm**
Captioned: **18 Nov, 2:30pm**

Sunset Boulevard
Savoy Theatre
Audio described: **8 Nov, 7:30pm**
Captioned & BSL interpreted: **15 Nov, 7:30pm**

The Time Traveller's Wife: The Musical
Apollo Theatre
Audio described: **13 Jan 2024, 2:30pm**
Captioned: **14 Nov, 7:30pm**
BSL interpreted: **7 Feb 2024, 7:30pm**

Treason The Musical
Sheffield Lyceum
Audio described, signed: **2 Nov, 7:15pm**
Captioned: **4 Nov, 3pm**

Two Strangers (Carry a Cake across New York)
Kiln Theatre
Audio described: **30 Nov, 7:30pm**

Wicked
Apollo Victoria Theatre
Captioned: **3 Mar 2024, 2:30pm**
Audio described: **14 Oct, 2:30pm; 21 Mar 2024, 7:30pm**
Signed: **12 Nov, 2:30pm**

The Witches
National Theatre, Olivier
BSL interpreted: **28 Dec, 7pm; 17 Jan 2024, 1pm**
Audio described: **9 Dec, 1:30pm; 20 Jan 2024, 1:30pm; 24 Jan 2024 1pm**
Captioned: **14 Dec, 7pm; 17 Jan 2024, 1pm; 24 Jan 2024 7pm; 27 Jan 2024 1.30pm**
Sensory adapted: **21 Dec, 7pm**

Our listings cover the period between 28 September and 1 December 2023 inclusive; all information correct at time of going to press

PHOTOGRAPHY: Manuel Harlan

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My Musicals

Olivier Award-winner **Jenna Russell**, starring in Flowers For Mrs Harris, recalls a life-changing audition for Sylvia Young, finding her big belt and meeting Sondheim for the first time

I hadn't seen the film but my stepdad really loved the soundtrack of *West Side Story* and he had it on in the car all the time on this old format of an eight-track cartridge. He even played it at home in the front room and I remember coming down the stairs singing and dancing to it. I must have been about 10. And my stepdad did all sorts of jobs, from being a cab driver to being an antiques and junk dealer, so we had lots of weird curios in the house, including this old-fashioned reel-to-reel tape recorder. I worked out, still at this incredibly young age, that there was this knob that you turned and Maria's voice would disappear. Turn it the other way and Anita's voice would disappear. So I had this little microphone and I would record myself singing along to both sides of their duet.

When I did my first audition, for the Sylvia Young Theatre School, I had to sing a song. I was 14 and I'd never sung properly in my life, so I said I'd sing Tony's song 'Something's Coming'. But, of course, I had no idea what key I was singing in or how and when to come in… Which seems to be characteristic of my entire career.

I remember thinking: 'I've done so badly.' Then I had to do a speech and for some reason I took myself to the back corner of the room and decided I'd face away but then whip around with the speech. I knew, if I don't get this right I'll have a horrible time at the school I'll have to go to instead. So I gave it my all. I had purple hair and everything but Sylvia said: 'You've quite a Victorian face – I'm sure we can find stuff for you,' and she let me in. It changed my life.

But although I knew every word and note of *West Side Story*, the first musical I saw was *A Chorus Line* at the Theatre Royal Drury Lane. My mum had the album and I used to sing and dance to it. But I remember my mum coming home one day and she said she'd seen it and I was devastated… So she took me and I loved it.

After Sylvia Young, I got my first theatre job without a chaperone because I'd hit 16, but I was so naive – I had no idea who anyone was. It was at the Lyric Hammersmith and it was a family science fiction musical about three children who travel into a fairy-tale world. It was called *ABBAcadabra*, it was produced by Cameron Mackintosh, and it was a stage version of a French TV programme in which everyone sang ABBA songs but with brand new lyrics originally by Alain Boublil and translated by people like Don Black and Mike Batt.

As rehearsals went on I began to realise how amazing the cast was. This was 1983 and everyone was in it: the popstar BA Robertson, Phil Daniels, Elaine Paige… I'd met Dexter Fletcher at other auditions and he was playing one of us kids. Nigel Harman was the other one and although he was playing older he was only about 10 and we had to be all snoggy!

The show where I really found my voice was Howard Goodall's *Girlfriends* at the Oldham Coliseum, alongside Clare Burt and Maria Friedman. There were only float mics, and Howard said: 'I can't hear you.' I'd never properly trained my voice but I tried again and this huge chest voice came out – and I realised I had this big belt. I was so thrilled that I could sound a tiny bit like Liza Minnelli. It carved a niche for me: a spirited woman who could also be open emotionally… With access to a good belt.

> **I'd never properly trained my voice, but this huge chest voice came out. I was thrilled that I could sound a tiny bit like Liza Minnelli**

My first Sondheim was when I took over in *Follies* at the Shaftesbury Theatre playing Young Sally to Julia McKenzie. And Eartha Kitt was Carlotta and every night I'd stand in the wings and watch her every move. That was when I first met Sondheim. I remember him telling me stories about *Sweeney Todd*.

Years later, I was playing Sarah in Michael Grandage's *Guys and Dolls*. Anna-Jane Casey's husband Graham MacDuff was in it and told me about a production that AJ was in at the Menier Chocolate Factory of *Sunday in the Park With George*, so I went to see the Sunday matinee. There weren't many people there and it was the third preview and on a really technical show a lot of that was up the spout but I cried – I was making animal noises.

I was still sobbing when I went backstage afterwards. It turned into a massive hit and AJ got pregnant so, luckily for me, I was asked to do it. Sometimes you get your little moment when you're in the right place, in the right show. I loved working with Daniel Evans and I didn't have to worry about the production: I knew if we served the piece correctly it would have a profound effect on an audience. Even people who hated musicals came to see it because it had such a buzz. It took us to Broadway. I loved every minute. Thank you to everyone who got us there… And thank you, Steve. I know it sounds ridiculous, but what an honour.

I'm now on to *Flowers for Mrs Harris*. It shows how someone's kindness can have a profound effect. How little acts of goodness shift the molecules around them. I saw the last matinee of the previous production and found myself really weeping from the middle of the second act. And when the lights came up I looked around and a lot of other people were crying too. I like feeling stuff in the theatre. I hope we won't mess it up. M

As told to David Benedict

Jenna Russell plays the title role in Flowers for Mrs Harris at Riverside Studios from 30 September to 26 November – visit riversidestudios.co.uk

PHOTOGRAPHY: Taylor Rettke

My must-have recording

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At Sylvia Young's, Russell Nash gave me the original cast recording of *Sweeney Todd*. Sitting in the dark with the libretto and that recording gave me the entire show. I'd never even noticed details of orchestration until then. My imagination ran riot. Stunning.

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